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FIREWORKS

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May/Jun 2015

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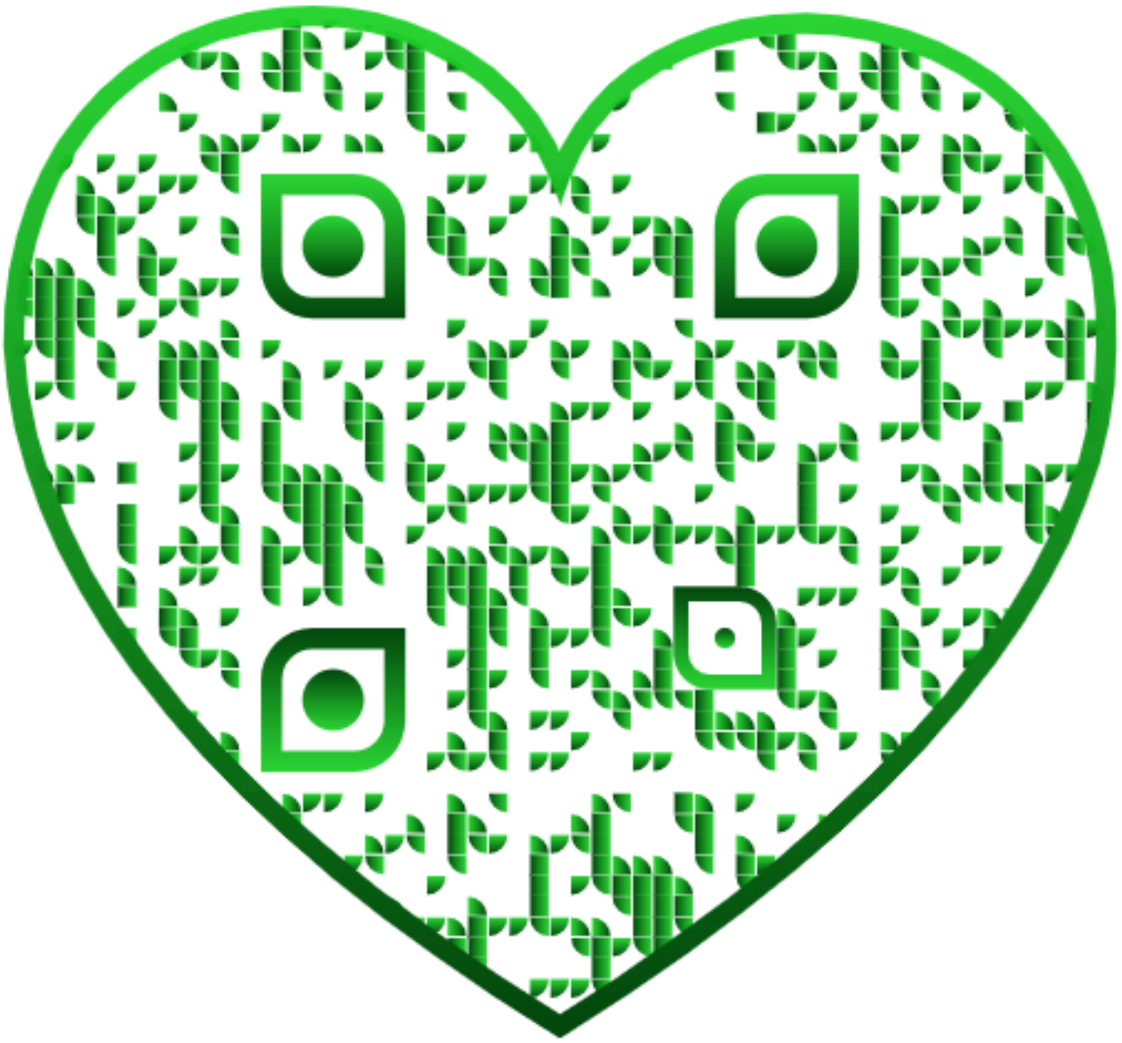

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GROUP ONE: MELODIC HARD ROCK AND AOR

1. **Helix** - Winning Is The Best Revenge
From the album: Bastard Of The Blues
www.planethelix.com

2. **Autograph** - You Are Us We Are You
From the Single: You Are Us We Are You

3. **Serpentine** - La Tragedienne
From the album: Circle Of Knives
http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Serpentine/221252731353

4. **Superstitious** - Ride On The Stars
From the album: Ride On The Stars
www.superstitious.com.br

5. **Powertrain** - I Like You A Lot
From the album: Conductor
www.powertrainband.com

6. **The Deep** - Out of Touch
From the album: Premonition
www.facebook.com/TheDeepUK

7. **From The Fire** - Into Your Heart
From the album: Evil Men Do
www.from-the-fire.com

8. **Ice Blue** - The Light Of This World
From the album: Back To The Light
www.facebook.com/pages/ICE-BLUE/

9. **MainStreet** - Short Steps
From the album: Second Chance
www.mainstreetrock.com

10. **Cholane** - Get Down
From the album: Caution
www.cholane.de

11. **Knock Out Kaine** - Cascading Down
From the album: Rise Of The Electric Jester
www.knockoutkaine.com

12. **Scream Maker** - In The Nest of Serpents
From the album: Living In The Past
http://screammaker.com

13. **The Val** - Up to Where U are
From the album: Heading For The Surface
www.theval.es

14. **Fugitive** - I'll Be There
From the album: Black Planet
www.fugitiveweb.co.uk

15. **Robin Brock** - Warrior
From the album: Monsters
www.robinbrock.com

16. **Durval Gama**- Luna's Underdog - Medley
From the album: Vol. 1 - Anthropophobia
www.facebook.com/durval.dagama

17. **Ten** - Alone In The Dark Tonight
From the album: Albion
www.tenofficial.com

18. **Vital Silence** - Waiting List
From the album: What's Left For Mystery
www.facebook.com/VitalSilence

19. **Steve Dalton** - See The Light
From the upcoming EP

20. **Empire Of Fools** - Devil Inside
From the single: Devil Inside
www.empireoffools.co.uk

21. **Firewolfe** - Long Road Home
From the album: We Rule The Night
www.limb-music.com/promotion
www.firewolfe.com

22. **Defy All Reason** - Bad Blood
From the album: The Road Ahead
www.defyallreason.co.uk

23. **Laney's Legion** - Taste Of Your Tongue
From the album: Laney's Legion
www.chrislaney.com

24. **Slam Cartel** - Hypnotised
From the single: Vanishing Worlds/ Hypnotised
www.slamcartel.com

25. **Monster Sound** - Miss Borderline
From the album: Scars To Realize
www.monster-sound.ch

26. **Rockamama** - Alcohol
From the album: Rockamama
www.rockamama.com

27. **Refurbished** - Only Want The Best
From the album: Only Want The Best
www.bigswedestudios.com

28. **Saints Trade** - Inside
From the album: Robbed Paradise
www.saintstrade.com

29. **Ian Toomey** - Very Soon Everyones Leaving
From the album: TBA
www.iantoomey.com

30. **Fried Goat** - She Makes Mistakes
From the album: Fried Goat
www.friedgoat.com

31. **In Faith** - Radio
From the album: There's A Storm Coming
www.infaithofficial.com

32. **JoyFocus** - Break
From the album: Random Access Digital Audio Heresy
www.joyfocus.com

33. **Silked & Stained** - Much Love
From the EP: Silked & Stained
www.facebook.com/Silked.and.Stained

34. **Legacy of The Beginning** - Rock On
From the album: Legacy Of The Beginning
www.legacyofthebeginning.no

35. **Conjuring Fate** - House On Haunted Hill
From the EP: House On Haunted Hill
www.facebook.com/conjuringfate

36. **Jezebel Dogs** - What's Wrong With Rock 'n Roll
From the album: Goddess Of Speed
http://jezebeldogs.com

37. **Bigfoot** - The Other Side Of Paradise
From the EP: Bigfoot
www.facebook.com/bigfootukrock

38. **The King Lot** - Addicted
From the album: The King Lot
www.thekinglot.com

39. **All Seeing Eyes** - Wild Life (The Tribe)
From the album: Trinity Road
www.facebook.com/ALLSEEINGEYESMETAL

GROUP TWO: 70's RETRO ROCK/BLUES & SOUTHERN ROCK & AMERICANA/FOLK

40. **The Fireflys** - Branches
From the album: The Fireflys
www.thefireflys.co.uk

41. **Dr.Hoss** - Wooden House
From the album: Dust For Prints
www.facebook.com/hossphd

42. **Kinesis 4** - Feel Alright
From the album: Satyagraha
www.kinesis4.com

43. **Plain Dirty Blues Band** - Chasin My Tail
From the album: Slow Burn
www.plaindirtybluesband.com

44. **Olé Ask** - C´mon
From the album: Kisses And Cool Water
www.oleask.com

45. **Midnight Rendezvous** - Red Lipstick
From the album: Red Lipstick
www.facebook.com/midnightrendezvousytown

46. **Young American Double Action Revolver** - Don't Be Down
From the EP: Young American Double Action Revolver
www.facebook.com/Young.American.Double.Action.Revolver

47. **The Damned and Dirty** - Patron Saint
From the album: Rolling Into Town
www.thedamnedanddirty.com

48. **Fran May & Richard Newman** It's Such A Waste
From the album: The Wedding Dress
www.franmay.com

49. **Dirty Basement Blues** - Nail Driver
From the album: Waterford Coming Clean
www.facebook.com/TheDirtyBasementBluesBand

GROUP THREE: PROGRESSIVE ROCK

50. **Bend Sinister** - Best Of You
From the album: Animals
www.bendsinisterband.com

51. **Twombley Burwash** - Zzzvv
From the album: Grak
www.facebook.com/twombleyburwash

52. **Cryptex** - New York Foxy
From the album: End Silence
www.cryptexmusic.com

53. **Umpfel** - The Midas Touch (feat. Matt Harnett)
From the album: Cactus
www.facebook.com/umpfel

54. **Crèpuscule** - Au bord du goufre
From the album: Virr
www.crepuscule.de

55. **Jules Martinez** - Somatoform
From the album: DSM
http://julesjuliomartinez.bandcamp.com

GROUP FOUR: SYMPHONIC ROCK/POWER METAL AND HEAVY METAL

56. **Corners Of Sanctuary** - On The Hunt
From the album: Axe To The Grind
www.cornersofsanctuary.com

57. **Patrizia** - On The Brink
From the album: Rock The Throne
www.patriziamusic.com

58. **Winter's Edge** - Foresee Me And Dream
From the album: The Ferryman's Eyes
www.facebook.com/OfficialWintersEdge

59. **Astralion** - At The Edge Of The World
From the album: Astralion
www.astralion.org

60. **Drakkar** - Lost
From the album: Once Upon a Time In Hell
www.drakkarband.com

61. **Hell's Chopper** - Rock Out (Fool)
From the album: First Bite
www.hellschopper.com

62. **Seven Steps Of Denial** - What Doesn't Kill
From the album: From Ashes
www.sevenstepsofdenial.com

63. **Neverworld** - Eminent Reprisal
From the album: Visions Of Another World
www.neverworldmetal.co.uk

64. **Ann my Guard** - Dark Sea Blue
From the album: Innocence Descent
www.facebook.com/annmyguard

65. **Jack The Frost** - Jack The Frost
From the EP: Fool To Be Cool
www.jackthefrost.com

66. **Equinox** - Breath Of Life
From the album: The Cry Of Gaia
http://equinoxinophis.com

67. **Deep Sleep Operator** - Teacher of the Black Arts
From the album: While The Earth Sleeps
www.deepsleepoperator.com

GROUP FIVE: MODERN/ALTERNATIVE ROCK

68. **City Of Auburn** - Soul Searcher
From the EP: Soul Searcher
facebook.com/cityofauburnmusic

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FIREWORKS

Headquarters:
Fireworks Magazine
10 Dunnock Close, Offerton
Stockport, SK2 5XD, UK
fireworks.mag@ntlworld.com
www.rocktopia.co.uk

Editor:
Bruce Mee

Reviews Editor:
Dave Scott

Assistant Editors:
Steven Reid, Anthony Heeks
& Rob McKenzie

Art Editor:
James Gaden
www.solitaryvision.co.uk

Staff Writers:
Phil Ashcroft
Sue Ashcroft
Dave Bott
Carl Buxton
Monica Castedo-Lopez
Dave Cockett
Alan Holloway
Duncan Jamieson
Ian Johnson
Gary Marshall
Mike Newdeck
Ray Paul

Contributors this issue:
Mike Ainscoe
Michael Anthony
Bruce E. J. Atkinson
Andy Brailsford
Julia Braun
Sophie Brownlee
Mick Burgess
Az Chaudhry
Dave Crompton
Kieran Dargan
Mark Donnelly
Lara Kisel
Alexandra Mrozowska
Helen Bradley-Owers
Ian Parry
Brent Rusche
Steve Swift
Woody

Cover CD compiler:
Nicky Baldrian
twosidemoon.promo@ntlworld.com

Rocktopia Personnel:
Webmaster - Bernhard Kellerer
Website Developer - Joe Hager
News Editor - Paul Woodward
Podcasts - Steve Price

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CONTENTS

Dan Patlansky 4
Pallas 5
FM 6
Halestorm 8
Black Star Riders 10
From The Fire 11
Richie Kotzen 12
Autograph 14
The King Lot 15
Status Quo 16
Magic Kingdom 18
Neal Morse Band 19
Tommy Denander 20
Michael Schenker 22
The Val 24
Nelson 26
Terra Nova 29
Jim Peterik & Marc Scherer 30
Steve Hackett 32
Eden's Curse 34
Talon 35
Nightwish 36
Smash Into Pieces 38
Serpentine 39
Whitesnake 40
Frédéric Slama's AOR 82

OTHER STUFF

Album Reviews 45
Reissues 70
Short - Sharp - Shots - Of - Rock! 73
Multimedia 74
Bookmark 75
Playlists 76
Firin' On All Six 78

FM - Page 6

Photo: Julia Braun

Whitesnake - Page 40

EDITORIAL

Once again their was a fierce debate about which artist should go on the cover of this issue of Fireworks. There were several contenders, but in the end we went for that old master of the double, or even single, entendre, David Coverdale of Whitesnake.

Personally, I have been rather vocal on Facebook about my disappointment in the fact the new Whitesnake album is a covers album – *not* because I don't think there is merit in ol' Cov revisiting his past, more so that there was so much debate and conjecture about the upcoming new album: would the songs be as good as the Doug Aldritch period? How would new boy Joel Hoekstra measure up? Would it better the wonderful 'Forevermore'? Of course, most of those questions were thrown out the window when it was announced shortly before release that the new album was going to be a collection of Deep Purple Mk 3 covers. My disappointment was not so much the idea in itself, but the secrecy that had been maintained throughout, thus rendering many peoples' expectations and questions completely moot. That said, I'm sure the album will still be a monster, and any project that might end up bringing Blackmore back into the hard rock environment surely gets my vote!

Quite a few artists go down the re-recording route, recent examples being Harem Scarem, Robin Beck and Twisted Sister. Usually, this is done by the band to get the rights to their old songs back, although in my opinion, it's pretty hard to beat the originals. One band I *would* love to see re-visit their past and re-record songs from their first two releases is Magnum. Those classic songs with today's production techniques would be amazing! I know Bob Catley would love to do it, but Tony Clarkin is not so keen on revisiting his past. Come on Tony, you know the band never get a penny from all these early re-issues and compilations, so just *do it* and make countless long-time fans extremely happy!

A mere six months on from their successful re-launch on Rocktopia Records, UK melodic rockers Ten are about to release their awesome follow up, Isla De Muerta (taken from the Pirates of the Caribbean spelling, before our Spanish speaking friends rise up in indignation). Featuring all the classic Ten motives: lengthy epics, lush ballads and mesmerising melodic masterpieces, all infused with stunning vocals and guitaring, this little gem will see the light of day at the end of May. Get ready for another winning delivery from Gary Hughes and the boys!

After a long break, this issue sees another large collection of free songs. We hope you find some material you like – if you do, be sure to drop the artists a line and let them know where you heard them from.

Finally, after reading James' editorial last issue, I think I should keep him well away from the keyboard in future. Or else, make sure he stays on his meds, hee hee hee …

Until June, keep pushing the Fireworks name – rocking all over the world!

Bruce

Dan Patlansky

While the name Dan Patlansky probably hasn't crossed your path before, that's all likely to change. A South African with a penchant for gutsy Blues Rock, Patlansky found himself hand picked by Bruce Springsteen himself to open for 'The Boss' in Johannesburg. If that wasn't enough, Patlansky's new album 'Dear Silence Thieves' was voted the number one Blues Rock album of 2014 by the Blues Rock Review USA, topping a list that also included Joe Bonamassa, Rival Sons and Philip Sayce. With the album gaining some traction in the US and Europe, James Gaden was keen to learn more…

You're a new name to me, despite the fact that your press release states this is actually your seventh album.

It is, but bear in mind the other six were only released in South Africa, so it's six previous albums on a much smaller scale! (laughs)

Is Blues Rock something that is popular in South Africa?

It's a niche market, which I think is the case in most places, but because of our small population, it's *really* niche if you know what I mean. But in that niche is a great, loyal following and it really has grown over the last ten years. I had a lot of people on their sixties coming to see me when I started but there seems to have been a revival, not just here but all over the world, where younger kids are coming to see a modern take on the Blues.

What started you on the Blues?

It was my parents. My father was a big fan of the classic Blues, my mum was into Classic Rock. That was all I grew up listening to. When I decided to pick up a guitar, the most natural form of music to play was Blues Rock. It was a musical family, not in terms of playing, but in terms of being surrounded by the sound, so it's always been a big part of my life.

The new album seems to have been a breakthrough for you, as you were voted as having the 'Best Blues Rock Album' in the Blues Rock Review in the USA.

That was amazing. I would have been happy just making the list, with the other names that were on there. It was a big shock when I found I was number one, but a welcome shock! That really sparked interest in myself and the album, especially in the UK, it got me hooked up with Peter Noble's PR company which has made a massive difference. I have played the UK before but on a much smaller scale and it makes a real difference having the right people behind you.

Your other big achievement was you were hand picked to support Bruce Springsteen – did that happen before or after your Blues Rock Review?

That was before, it happened in February last year, we had just finished recording the album but it hadn't been released yet. To open for Springsteen was a humbling experience. There was close to 70,000 people in the stadium, and if that wasn't intimidating enough, Bruce Springsteen watched my entire set from the side of the stage! It was a fantastic thing and exposed my music, and the Blues, to a lot of people that probably wouldn't have come to one of my shows.

Did you get to talk to him?

I did, for about five minutes. I didn't see him beforehand, but as I came off the stage, he was waiting for us. I got five minutes to talk to him and he was fantastic, so down to earth and humble.

Photo: Pierre va der Walt

Tell me the story behind the album's title.

In 2013, I was in Germany supporting Everlast. He's been doing a stripped down, acoustic thing, just him, a couple of guitars and a piano player. I did my set and Everlast came on stage. During the third song, the whole audience were dead quiet except for these two guys at the back who were having a really loud conversation. Everlast lost his mind! It was crazy. He just stopped in the middle of the song and said to the guys they had to shut up or get out… only he said it with much fouler language than that. (laughs) The guys started arguing with him from the audience, and it went on for nearly 20 minutes while 900 other people stood there awkwardly. (laughs). Eventually Everlast put his guitar down and dived off the stage, ready to punch these guys. That might be a bit overboard, but I understood his point – people have paid to listen to the music and these guys were spoiling that. It inspired me and I called the new album 'Dear Silence Thieves'. I tell that story at all my shows, hoping to educate those who don't know how to behave. If you want to stand and chat, stay in the pub! (laughs)

The album has a real energy to it, it sounds like a live album.

It was mostly live, so thank you! There's a few overdubs here and there but for the most part it was done live. I think you capture more energy than if you multi-track everything. You're all feeling the music together, so we track 90% of the song live and then add all the bells and whistles afterwards.

Do you have the songs written beforehand or do you sketch them out and improvise if you're cutting it live?

The songs are pretty much complete before we start. We have gone in with a basic idea and beefed it up, but there have been some which you play back and they sound like utter crap! (laughs) Also, you have to be careful not to spend too long in the studio messing about with something. I kind of like to get as close to a complete song as possible and then capture it. When I write a song, I always think about how it will sound live first. I've fallen into a trap before of writing a great sounding song on the record, but I haven't been able to reproduce it live. There's only three of us on stage, so if I put too much in the song, we can never do them. If I have a ten track album, I want to be able to do at least nine of them live. I'll be doing that when I showcase the album at the Borderline – come and check it out!

Dan Patlansky plays an album showcase at The Borderline in London on 27th April, to coincide with the release of 'Dear Silence Thieves'. He has also been named as the support act for Joe Satriani's 'Shockwave' tour in November.

Having shocked and amazed with their previous album 'XXV', Pallas have returned with the enigmatically titled 'wearewhoweare'. It's a compelling departure from the heavy and conceptual 'XXV' and possibly their best album to date. Finding out more, Fireworks' Andy Brailsford askswhatheasks, bassist Graeme Murray answerswhatheanswers…

The last Pallas album 'XXV' was a concept piece and the word Progressive can knock people dead. Add concept to that and you'd think the plague had returned. Do you not think that doing a concept album as a Progressive band is …?

Angelic? The last Muse album, maybe? See, it's funny, it's still happening, you just have to be clever and not mention the word "concept". Prog's been a dirty word for a long time but Muse is a Prog band and if *Top of the Pops* was still on, they would be on it. It's all about perception. That's one of the reasons that we, in one of our long discussions about where we were going as a band, suggested at one point that we didn't put the band's name to the album and just put it out as 'wearewhoweare' and see what kind of reaction we got. I think to some extent radio stations, journalists and the like go, "ergh, Pallas – new album. Yeah well, that's Prog" and just dismiss it without listening to what's going on in it… It's frustrating, you know, rather than just judging it on what they hear, people are judging it without listening to it. But we just enjoy playing together. We get on really well. There's a bond between you when you've been writing and creating and playing music together for years and these days, we write for pleasure. We write what we want to write.

When we ended up being signed to EMI we had the "big deal" and thought the world was going to fall at our feet. We thought we were going to make a fortune; it puts a huge amount of pressure on you. Suddenly, you're only as good as your next album and your whole future's depending on it. Now we don't feel we have to do this or have to do that when we're writing and it's more liberating. We go into the studio and write music and think, "hang on a minute, this is a bit unusual" which we have felt with some of the stuff on the new album. When we were signed to EMI, we were told, "You know guys, this is a long term project. We are looking to recruit a third and fourth album. You're not under any pressure" and then, two months later, it was like, "where are the singles, guys?" Excuse me? Hang on, didn't you say…? So that did affect it. One of my biggest regrets is that we didn't enjoy ourselves as much as we should have when we were professional because of this underlying pressure. I mean, we played Reading Festival in front of thirty thousand people and you want to actually soak that in and savour that but I remember thinking, "Oh, this has got to be good. We've got to play well." It took the enjoyment out of it.

Singer Paul Mackie is the latest addition to the crowd and the music on this album really suits him. I couldn't imagine previous frontman Alan Reed doing it as convincingly…

The reason the album ended up being called 'wearewhoweare'; it was quite apparent that quite a lot of the material was considerably different from the last album. Of course, 'XXV' was a sequel to 'The Sentinel'. It was a heavy album and conceptual so we thought, right, we're not going to do that sort of thing this time. A few months into the album, I'm thinking, good lord, this is quite different. What will people think? I think it was Mike Bentley who said, "Look, we are who we are, and people accept us for what we are", and that's where the title came from. The situation before was Ronnie, Niall, myself and Colin were writing because Alan was living in London and had a busy career with the BBC. We'd be writing music, lyrics and melodies, sometimes they might not have been in the right key for him, it may well be that he might not like the melody, maybe they didn't suit him or whatever and the songs wouldn't work as well for him. On 'XXV' Paul had to sing melodies written by myself or Ronnie or Niall because that album was pretty much written. With 'wearewhoweare', Paul's been involved at the heart of things and he's put his heart and soul into this album and the songs have evolved with him being present. The music and the voice have gone together because they've been created together. Paul is a talented guy and he's kind of fired everybody up and given us a new lease of life.

On the new album, Niall seems to have moved his guitar parts away from the melodic Pink Floyd type stuff and maybe been more akin to Radiohead.

I think some of the stuff he comes away with, everybody's just left going "what the fuck?" Niall is an enigma, I think him and his guitar are one and whatever he's feeling, he can express through his fingers and through his guitar. He'll probably hit me for saying this, he's very shy in a sense and very self-deprecating and we have to poke him with a stick when we're in the studio if we want searing, mad, insane guitar. Personally, I think he loves doing that kind of stuff but he likes to make us work for it. If you look on the website, the big guitar solo in 'Dominion', there's some really weird sounds at the start of it, almost like wires breaking and what he was doing was something with his whammy bar that was making all the strings sort of creak. It's quite amusing because we were videoing him when he was recording the solo and it sounds like he should be on the top of a massive granite plinth with flames and smoke behind him but he's actually sat on a settee in the studio with his glasses on the end of his nose and his slippers and he is bashing and hauling at the guitar, ill-treating the guitar so it's quite a juxtaposition in the little video clip. It doesn't quite fit the image that it portrays when you listen to it!

It's difficult to read the album title as you've made it all one word. You think "What the hell's that?" until you look closer. But album covers have sold albums, especially back in the seventies, and the art work on the album is extraordinary.

Mike discovered this guy Anton and thought he was amazing. It was an interesting process because he doesn't speak a word of English and we don't speak any Russian. Mike was having to use the iPhone iTranslate app to communicate with him but we've managed it. He's got some imagination and, you're right, you want striking artwork and we think we got that on this album. Roger Dean must have pulled in a huge amount of interest for Yes from the look of their album covers. The merchandise has been selling really well at all the shows because it is so striking and people just want to own some of the images. It's all got a menacing edge to it. It's weird. That's what living in Siberia does for you!

The renaissance of FM has been nothing short of spectacular since their reformation. Excellent albums, amazingly successful tours with high-profile acts and endless Radio support. Their excellent new album 'Heroes And Villains' looks set to maintain that status, so naturally Fireworks was on hand to find out more from the man with the golden voice; Steve Overland is the Hero, Ant Heeks is the, erm, Villain…

Things have been going great for FM. When you put the band back together for Firefest in 2007 did you ever envisage that you would reach these heights again?

Never, honestly. We got back together to do one show, that's the truth of it. The people that came out the woodwork, big league people were saying "Are you going to carry on?" We hadn't even thought about it, we had to sit down and think about it. All these people that came from all over the world, because it was the first one that had sold out, it was like "What just happened?" It was obvious people had been waiting for us to do this, so we never expected anything with the first album 'Metropolis'. We thought we'd just release it and see what happened with it and it's been like a roller coaster ride. We've gone from strength to strength, doing big gigs with Foreigner, Journey, Europe, all those big bands again, selling out headline shows in decent sized venues. We never thought we'd get a second bite of the cherry like we have done. We're back to where we were before, some people think we're bigger, we're probably getting better responses to everything we do than we did first time round, Radio 2 playing us, it's just unbelievable. We never did expect any of this at all.

Do you think the tours with the likes of Foreigner and Europe have helped to raise your profile?

It always does, because you've got virtually the same audience for all three bands. So it stands to reason you're going to be able to steal some fans from the other two bands' fan-bases if there are people in the audience who are not aware of the band from the first time round, or are aware of it but have never really listened to it. You're always going to be able to pick up fans like that. How we started back in the day touring with Meatloaf, Tina Turner and all those people, that's how the band got its initial following, by going out with all the bigger bands and nicking fans, I guess. This time round that still applies, because when we did the European dates with Foreigner we were the main support – Europe didn't do those – and people in France and Germany and other parts of Europe didn't even know we'd reformed, so they'd be like, "You're back, you're back! When did you reform?" When we told them 2007 they were like, "Why haven't we heard about it?" So those kind of tours are always good for building your fan-base back up. Also it's great to be out with those kinds of bands again. We had no idea this was all gonna happen for us again, it's one thing after another, it's just brilliant. Since we came back, what makes us keep going and writing albums and putting out EPs? It's because of the response to the band has been so brilliant since we reformed, it just inspires you to keep going and keep bettering yourself. The Press are behind us, and all of the Press this time around, and radio… Planet Rock have been fantastic to us, Radio 2, it's just unbelievable, it keeps inspiring us to come up with new stuff.

Like your amazing new album 'Heroes And Villains'! Why did you switch to Frontiers records for this one?

Well, when we reformed we kind of had a plan that we were going to keep it all in-house, we didn't want to give anything away. We didn't know how many albums we were going to make, how it would go, what was going to happen, so we kept it close to our chests with 'Metropolis'. We didn't do a proper deal with that album, and we didn't do it for the second album, but now because of the momentum of the band, we're going from strength to strength and it's spreading across the world again, which we didn't know was going to happen. So it's now got to that stage where we can't control it, we need infrastructure in America, we need a Worldwide company now to help, we haven't got the manpower to keep doing it ourselves anymore. Frontiers have always been big fans, they were around when we first reformed but we weren't up to doing a deal, but now is the right time to do it because we need the help in other parts of the world. Also they gave us a great deal, they've been great so far, they're very supportive and they love the new album! So far I can't fault the relationship, fingers crossed it'll be a great partnership for the future. They hadn't even heard the album, it was already written and recorded and we just delivered it to them. That's what FM are about now. As you know FM were always with major labels, and sometimes we were pushed in directions we didn't want to go in. This time around with being older we're more experienced and we're not gonna let that happen. It's great from our point of view to have that control, we know by now what the FM fans want.

Since the reformation all of the albums have had their fair share of moods and tempos, but 'Heroes And Villains' is mainly a big, fat, up-tempo, guitar-based Rock 'n' Roll record. Was that what you always intended?

Do you know what mate? Not really. When we record an album we just write the songs and we just treat the songs how we think they should be, and it just turns out that way. This album has just turned out that way, it's quite up-tempo, but we never sit down and say, "We need a big anthem song, or an up-tempo song, or a ballad." We just write fifteen or twenty songs, they get the same treatment, they get the same time spent on them, they're all mixed in the same studio, then we have a pool of songs and we pick the album from that. 'Heroes And Villains' has turned out the way it is because we thought that was the best batch of songs that made up the best album. But we're really proud of it, it's a little bit more edgy, more up-tempo. I'm glad it's gone that way.

And Jim Kirkpatrick has really established himself as an integral part of the FM sound with this album.

Without a doubt. Jim's a big part of the band, he's twenty years younger than the rest of us which gives us a good kick up the arse. He's very up on how the music business is run today and social networking side of things, which we didn't have the first time around, and he's a great writer. Jim was a friend of mine before he joined FM. When we auditioned guitar players he was a long shot at the end. I told the lads I knew of him and that I thought he would be perfect for the band, so I asked him. He'd seen the Firefest thing and he said, "You're joking aren't you?" So we auditioned him in London and he got the job. It's the closest thing to having my brother back in the band, he's one of my best friends, he's a great character and the fans love him. He plays in that melodic style like Chris used to, he's a massive part of what FM is about now.

So what influenced the title 'Heroes And Villains'?

Nothing in particular. We had two working titles during the recording, then Merv found the image for the cover which we thought was great and would look fantastic on a T-shirt, and then he said he had a title that he thought would go great with it and we thought it just fitted great. No big thing behind it.

I thought it could have been influenced by the songs like 'Digging Up The Dirt' and 'Big Brother' which have more of a social commentary in the lyrics than what we're used to.

Good point, I hadn't thought of that. I'll be quoting that now when people ask me! Both those songs are influenced by things that happen. The idea for 'Digging Up The Dirt'… I went so somebody's house and they were on the phone so I sat down in his lounge and picked up some magazines like Heat, Hello, just a load of old shite really. As I was looking through them it made me realise that people aren't interested in the real news that's going on the world, they're more interested in who's got the most cellulite in the back of their legs and that load of shit. I got home and thought I'd write a song about it, I already had the title. Don Henley did the song 'Dirty Laundry' on a similar

theme, just about the Gutter Press and what's in newspapers and magazines really. 'Big Brother' is about the fact that wherever we go we're being watched by somebody, somewhere.

And 'Digging Up The Dirt' is accompanied by a risqué video…

Yeah, we thought it was about time we had some scantily clad women in our videos! We've never done it, all the bands back in the eighties in our day did that kind of stuff. You can only look at five old blokes for so long can't you? So we thought we'd get something sleazy in there that basically sums the song up.

On the flip-side is the ballad 'Walking With Angels' which is quite a departure for FM. Where did that idea come from?

I had that song many years ago, before we got back together. We were in the studio when we recorded 'Metropolis', one night we were having a few beers and they were all chatting, and I just got the acoustic out and started singing this song. Jim said "Hang on, that's brilliant, we've got to record it." But we didn't, and time went on. This album came around, and when we were in the studio Jim reminded me about this song, "Something about angels that you played to us once". I had to re-learn it, it had been so long since I played it, so I sang it to them and our manager was there and he said, "That's fantastic, you've go to record it just as it is, don't put a band on it, just you and the acoustic guitar." So that's what we did, we put a string quartet on to give it some colour, but not make into a big, epic band song. I think it's just a lovely song. That's the great thing now, we don't have any rules in the band because we're much more in control than we ever were. If we have a great song that we love, it can be any direction, we record it and if it comes out great we put it on the record.

One of FM's strengths is that you all contribute to the writing.

Yeah, and you need that. Everybody approaches writing in a different way and we all have our part to play in FM, which is why FM is very definitely a band, it's not just one guy. I come up with a lot of the initial ideas but then the other guys take it and turn it into an FM song, and that's important because otherwise bands have no identity, you've got to let the band make it their song. An idea is put to the band, whether it's a lyric or a hook, then FM put their stamp on it to make it sound like FM. That's how the band have kept their identity for all of these years. We have no rules, we just do the best album we possibly can, because it's not about us at the end of the day, it's about the people that buy it. We have to believe in everything we do, we'll never put out sub-standard rubbish. We sometimes take too long for that reason, we analyse so much sometimes we disappear up our own arses! (laughs)

You have become very prolific since the reformation though.

That is because of the reaction to the band, it inspires you and gives you the fire to keep coming up with new things. We've had no negativity at all. I've been doing interviews for the last two weeks and we've had a fantastic response to this record, it just makes you want to do more. We still get a real buzz out of it, just because we're older doesn't make any difference, it's still a great thing for me to go out there and see people sing every word of every song, because those songs have obviously made a difference in those people's lives. To be able to write a song and see how it touches people, it's an amazing thing I'll never get tired of.

So what does the future hold for FM, are you planning to keep this renaissance going for as long as you possibly can?

At the moment yes, why wouldn't we? We're as fresh and enthusiastic as ever because of what's been going on since we reformed, we have no reason not to be. We'll keep going as long as we can and keep making the best records we can. We'll never let the quality of the records suffer, it's very important to us. If we get to that stage like I think we did first time around, where I didn't think the records were of a standard that they should have been as the earlier albums were, that's when we split. If it ever got to that stage again, we'd split again. But at the moment we're coming up with strong albums, the band are better than ever live, we're getting great tours, so who wouldn't want to keep doing this for as long as they can?

It would be safe to say that Halestorm have come a long way in a short space of time. The venues get bigger and continue to sell out but the attitude of the band remains the same. Though Lzzy Hale was feeling a little unwell on the day of the show at the Apollo in Manchester, she was still able to answer some questions for Firework's Dave Bott about the new 'Into The Wild Life' album (reviewed this issue), reinforcing the old 'show must go on' adage and reminding us in the process that everyone has their fallibilities.

Tonight's show is the last of the current UK Tour. I know you're fond of playing here and the venues get bigger every time. How has this new tour gone, illness aside?

The Tour has been amazing! It's so incredible to watch our fan base grow and truly have a relationship with the Rock and Rollers over here!

Congratulations on the new record. I've been playing it constantly since I received a copy at the end of February. How well have the new songs you're including in the set been received?

The new songs have been received very well! There's a true appreciation for us going back to our roots. Everyone is stoked! And obviously we love playing the new songs!

I know the song 'Mayhem' was included during the encore on the last tour so does that mean it was written whilst you were on tour or was it an older song?

Yes, 'Mayhem' was the first one we decided to test out live, and even then, we ended up finishing it while in the studio. Writing for a record is a process...very rarely do things stay as the demo version. They evolve and grow. We completed a little over half the selection of songs before we walked into the studio.

There were no writing credits included with my copy of the CD so have you been enlisting the services of some writers outside the band again?

We were very choosy. If we got together with a writer outside of our band, it was because he or she is our friend, and we have a chemistry. I like writing with other people. I write outside of Halestorm all the time and most of those songs we don't even use. They get sent out for other artists to have. The goal for this record was to capture an honesty and an energy that was true to who we are. The only way to achieve that with outside writers is if we have a chemistry and know each other's insides.

The bio states that the album was recorded 'live' in a former church? Were the songs actually tracked as a band and recorded that way? It's almost like the recording techniques that bands used to use before the advances in technology.

Yes! We recorded all of the basic tracks live as a band, while standing in a circle in this beautiful reformed church in Nashville. The only things we recorded outside of that were a few keyboard parts, some background vocals and certain guitar solos. Everything was done as a performance, which is tough actually, because if one of us royally screws up all of us have to start from the beginning again! Haha. It was intense but it really brought us back to that musical language we've always had as a foursome! It's a bit of an old fashioned, Classic Rock way of recording but it's so worth it!

Some of the songs come across as quite introspective, such as 'Dear Daughter' and 'What Sober Couldn't Say'. Is that you tapping into personal experiences and sharing them in a therapeutic way? Have we revealed a few more pages from Lzzy Hale's personal diary?

Writing is my therapy and also my personal act of rebellion. I figure shit out through song. I always have. Yes, there are many burdens, and questions lifted and answered throughout this album.

Some of the material is a million miles away from what you created on the first two albums. Was it a conscious decision to makes songs so different or did they just come from the writing mindset you found yourself in?

We honestly just chase after whatever gets us excited the most. It's been a few years and laps around the world since we wrote for 'The Strange Case Of…'. So the growth is there. And quite literally an "album" is a snapshot of where we are at in our lives and journey.

Obviously 'The Strange Case Of...' was very successful for you so did you find yourself under any kind of pressure to try and repeat that success?

Me personally? Not at all. Our proven gauge for success and forward movement over the years has always rested on whether or not WE love the songs and the record. I knew that no matter what, if we loved this record, we will always continue. It's a bit selfish, but if we don't love the hell out of the record how can we expect anyone else to?

I wrote in my review of the new CD that you are obviously not afraid to take risks musically and that development

and increased creativity are intrinsic and vital if a band is to evolve... do you think that is a fair comment?

I like what you've said there. One of my favourite quotes is "The Greatest Risk Is Never Taking One". My whole life has been one risk after another. I'd rather error on the side of "go for it" then play it safe.

Is it still a challenge coming up with new material or is it getting easier as you become more experienced?

There are always days where I get writers block or can't finish a song. That's just normal. But I'm proud to say that I'm in an amazing place in my life where I have no qualms speaking my mind and purely being myself. That mindset has opened up a lot of honesty and freedom in my songwriting.

How did you hook up with the new producer Jay Joyce?

He was one of a few producers suggested to us after we had settled on our "mission statement " for this record. Jay had the guts to take us on and truly go deeper into the rabbit hole that is Halestorm. He's like a mad genius and certainly brought out the best in us.

In the past there have been a number of songs held over for 'deluxe' versions of the CD. Is there any material left over from the writing and recording sessions this time?

Oh yes! Always! One of my favourite "extras" is one we will put on our deluxe edition of 'Into The Wild Life'. The song is called 'Unapologetic' and has such a weirdly wonderful build to it.

I love the collaboration with Lindsey Stirling on the song 'Shatter Me'. How did that come about? I actually think it would make a great Halestorm song with a full band performing it… any chance of that?

Thank you! Yes we've talked about just doing it live! Maybe one of these days! Lindsey sought me out for her record which was quite an honour. She is so talented. I'm always awestruck every time I perform with her!

With three CDs worth of material to choose from now is it becoming more difficult to decide on a setlist? I know you change it around from show to show. We've been having a great time screwing up the set list every night. And making it unique to each show. We'll be doing more of that after the record release, you never know what you're gonna get!

They can often become an expensive undertaking but have there been any thoughts about recording another live CD/DVD?

Yes! We really want to do that again. The last time we did something like that was in 2010. So we are due for another. We just have to choose where and when.

I interviewed Chris Daughtry last year and he informed me that he likes to spend the day having a work-out and then a nap before each show. I know you like to stay in shape. It made me smile a little as it's a big difference to the Rock and Roll lifestyle we associate with so many of the Classic Rock bands from the 70s and 80s. I expect it is important to keep healthy with all the travelling and PR you have to do?

Especially being a singer, it's very important to keep your body healthy. My body is my instrument after all. I notice that I perform with more ease when I'm taking care of myself. Even the big dogs in the 70s and 80s didn't have the schedule we do now. It seems that we all have to work twice as hard for half the reward. I don't mind it though... I get into trouble if I'm not busy. Ha ha!

And finally... what does the immediate future hold for Halestorm? Is it just touring and promoting the new record?

Tour! Tour! Tour! Haha! Our goal as a band has always just been to continue... there are new continents to discover, and many more good times to be had! And...we always say YES to adventure.

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After the success of Black Star Riders debut album 'All Hell Breaks Loose' and some extensive touring, the boys are back in town with a new release 'Killer Instinct' and a co- headlining U.K. tour with Europe. Ray Paul had a chance to catch up with Damon Johnson and discuss future touring plans, line-up changes and the new release.

How long did the album take to write and record?

The writing process officially started when Ricky Warwick came to my house in Nashville back in February of 2014. We came up with several ideas that made their way to the finished album: 'Charlie I Gotta Go', 'You Little Liar', and one of our bonus tracks, 'Gabrielle'. The writing continued in pockets of time throughout the touring season up until we started pre production with Nick Raskulinecz in September. It then took us three weeks to record the album.

How is new bass player Robbie Crane fitting into the line-up?

Crane continues to motivate, inspire, and impress us all! His musical life has carried him through some amazing experiences and he's played with some of the best musicians in the world. We are grateful that he was so taken with the strength of our debut album that he would consider coming down to have a jam with us. He has brought a tougher, fuller sound to the rhythm section that he occupies with Jimmy DeGrasso, and none of us have ever laughed louder and longer at another band mate in our lives!

There seems to be a theme of conflict in a lot of titles, like 'Killer Instinct', 'You Little Liar' and 'Sex Guns and Gasoline', is this deliberate or just coincidental?

It is neither. These are simply Warwick's powerful commentary on life, for everyone. Life is full of challenges and conflict and fear and hope and frustration and shattered dreams and struggle and triumph. It is ultimately what Black Star Riders stands for; songs for the common man. There is not a person alive that could not find a song lyric on this album to connect with.

BSR really seem to have found their own personal musical identity away from Thin Lizzy with this release, do you agree?

You are correct, to the point that we have found our essence and our podium to speak from and grow from. But we will always be proud to have launched this whole thing from the legacy and supporters of Thin Lizzy. We simply would not exist without that, and we will never take that for granted. Ever.

Will the live set have to rely less on Lizzy songs now you have two albums?

Indeed it will, simply by the fact that we had a solid debut album with five or six songs that really resonated with our audience, in addition to a quality follow-up that has loads of songs that we are energised to perform live. But it also provides us the option to change the set-list more often and substitute songs from the multitudes of great Lizzy material. Thank you, Scott Gorham!

Do you as song-writers still write with a single in mind?

No, we do not. We are simply writing with the goal of creating music that we ourselves would get off on listening to. Not only is BSR comprised of veteran musicians; it's filled with music lovers. And we feel that that enjoyment is the key to making this music identifiable to us specifically. Beyond that, we are fortunate to have a great team in our management and our record label that have experience in making decisions about singles.

Have you had to throw out a song because it was too close to what Lizzy might have previously done?

That's a good question. I think on the debut album, there were a couple of ideas that got "b-listed" because they reminded Gorham of a progression or vibe that he had heard before. 'Bullet Blues' is an example of that. Warwick and I wrote that song the absolute very first day we ever wrote together in 2012. And we would never deny that we had been listening to and discussing the Lizzy catalog, as was certainly a common sense thing to do at that time. As we never have a shortage of song ideas, we simply put that one on the sidelines when Gorham said, "hmm…I think I wrote that riff thirty years ago!" But as we forged ahead and finished the album, and then got such a great reaction to it, the band and the fans alike got more comfortable and proud of having BSR exist at all and carry elements of the Thin Lizzy sound forward into the 21st century. So we didn't hesitate to include '… Blues' on the new album.

You put on great live shows; do you have any plans to capture one on video for release?

We absolutely do. With the power that is social media, there are some great still photographs of BSR out there, along with some fantastic "fan shot" video footage. And I feel it is as exciting for us as it is our fans to think of how great a multi-camera BSR concert film could be. I would hope that comes to fruition much sooner rather than later.

What's been the band's proudest moment so far?

Certainly one of our proudest moments so far was getting 'The Killer Instinct' A-Listed on BBC2 Radio in London. It was the result of so many things; our great label, our even greater fan base, and the hard work on the songs that we achieved with Raskulinecz. It is exciting reinforcement that we are conducting old fashioned "artist development" on our own - meaning, our entire team - and that the world is paying attention. We are very proud indeed.

What are the touring plans worldwide for the band?

Simply, just that: we want to tour the entire world. BSR has yet to travel to South America, and we want to spread the word much more on the North American continent. There is talk of Australia, Russia, Japan… anywhere there are fans of honest Rock 'n' Roll, we want to go there and play very loud!

FROM THE FIRE

Back in 1992, From The Fire released the superlative 'Thirty Days and Dirty Nights' featuring the wonderful vocals of JD Kelly and guitar wizardry from Tommy Lafferty – and then, nothing. Of course, Lafferty went on to replace Micki Free in Crown of Thorns, having previously played with Jean Beauvoir on Voodoo X's 1989 release 'Vol 1: The Awakening', but the other members didn't record again – until now! Over twenty years later, From The Fire finally have recorded and released a follow up with 'Evil Men Do' and played their first ever UK show at last year's Firefest.

Bruce Mee caught up with Kelly and Lafferty to get all the background details, and also find out what the future holds …

So what were the instigators for getting the band to reform after over 20 years?

JD: It was a simple thing - we three love each other. That, and the stories we'd been hearing about the fans who were out there, after all those years. When we did some digging on the Internet - something that hardly existed back in the early '90s - our eyes got big. We tried in 2010, but it wasn't right; 2013 worked much better. Firefest was the catalyst.

We know Tommy has been in Crown of Thorns, but what have all the other guys been doing during the interim period?

TL: Mike (Sciotto) built a killer studio, played with Starship, worked with some great producers on various projects, including some work with John McCoy, and engineered and produced a slew of records out of his home base in upstate New York. J.D. left music and got into writing and magazine publishing, as well as partnering with his sister on a family business in the motor trade. He's back now!

Tell us more about the new album, 'Evil Men Do', and why that title. How many of the songs were old compositions, and how many new?

TL: 'Evil Men Do' was a catch-up album. Four songs, 'Evil Men Do', 'Stagefright', 'Leave Me Alone' and 'From The Fire', were songs that Joe and I demo'd for what was to be a follow-up to 'Thirty Days…' back in 1992. The album never got done but those songs got released as a bootleg. Of the balance, 'Liar' and 'Never Be Lonely' were even older and 'Blame It On The Moon' is a Brett Smiley song from the early '90s. 'Forever And A Day' was written when the band first talked about getting back together in 2010, and 'In Your Dreams' and 'Into Your Heart' were written for the record. The title song is all about the evil men do - the impulses that we can't help but feel.

I've heard some comments about the album being too slow paced, with no uptempo tracks.

JD: We've heard comments about the overall pace, but in the most positive sense. Reviewers liked the back half of the record for its calmer, more introspective feel as much as they liked the front half's AOR energy. 'From The Fire' is the hardest-edged, fastest-paced song; 'Stagefright' and 'Blame It On The Moon' are candy for a good set of headphones. The coolest part of all is how each reviewer has chosen a different favourite. The most recent was a reviewer from France who loved 'Stagefright', but we've heard some very nice things from people who dug the newer, more anthemic songs the most. Songs are songs; they start out as an itch, become what they are when the band starts playing them, and then something again when they get recorded... and then, something again when they're played live. It's all part of the fun.

You've started writing for a follow up album. What can you tell us about this – will there be a more varied selection of songs?

JD: We're always writing, so yeah, we have some stuff ready for a new round of recordings when the time comes. There are close to fifteen new songs in the till right now, some rockers, some power ballads, a duet – hello, Ms. Oversveen – and even a rather rude song or two. We're beginning the demo recordings in late March/early April. The working title for the next album - whenever that may be - is 'American Symphony'. We already have our favourites but we'll see what comes out of the board and monitors when the time comes.

How have sales of 'Evil Men Do' gone, and have you learned anything from the selling/promotion angle that you will put to better use for the next album?

TL: 'Evil Men Do' is a curiosity that hasn't seen proper release yet; we had a bunch pressed up as digipaks so that we'd have something for the fans to take away at Firefest, and those are almost all gone. We didn't have a label to help support a full release and we've had limited press coverage. We knew that if we showed up in the UK without a disc we'd be skewered - and rightfully so - by the fans. On the plus side, we placed fourth that weekend in merch sales, beaten only by the three headlining acts – God bless you, Claire Butler! On the minus side, we learned that labels still matter, a lot. So does having a producer. What's that saying? No man is an island? Well, no band is either. If all goes to plan, the next album will be done with the direct involvement of a label - and with old friends producing and engineering.

You played your first ever UK show at Firefest last year. Tell us a little about the experience.

JD: Firefest was a dream come true. A lot of bands have said that, but there's a ton of truth in there. We defy anyone to find as passionate and dedicated an audience as that crowd. We'd not played publicly, as a band, for over twenty years, and even after Kieran (Dargan) booked us, the road was rocky. I had throat problems, Tommy had to fly in from the West Coast to New York to join us in the studio, and then the keyboard player and bass player who had committed to the gig bailed at the last minute. If not for the good graces of John McCoy and the lovely Issa Oversveen, neither of whom rehearsed with us before the gig, we'd never have been there. And that would have been a shame. Firefest was an amazing – if occasionally white-knuckled – experience.

What does 2015 hold in store for From the Fire?

JD: 2015 is shaping up to be a very good year so far; we're really pleased with the new material, including the Jimi Jamison tribute single, 'You Will Survive', that's being mixed as we write this (by Pat Regan, who mixed both 'Thirty Days & Dirty Nights' and 'Evil Men Do'). We've gotten some interesting invites for FTF to be involved in some European festivals, including some later this year, but nothing's etched in stone yet. Our main focus is to get a label. We want to be writing, producing and recording; best to leave the business and marketing to those who know it.

And Tommy – what's the situation regarding Crown of Thorns?

TL: Crown of Thorns is still a band, and still on hiatus, as I've been concentrating on From The Fire. Jean (Beauvoir) is making a record with Micki Free - and we hear it's going to be a great one. It's not unlikely that we could do something in the future. Anything is possible with good people.

Richie Kotzen

Richie Kotzen is as prolific as he is talented. A gifted guitarist, skilled multi-instrumentalist, songwriter and superb singer, Kotzen divides his time between The Winery Dogs with Billy Sheehan and Mike Portnoy, and his expansive and varied solo career. Hot on the heels of 'The Essential' collection comes 'Cannibals', a brand new studio record with funky guitar, heartfelt ballads, guest stars and Kotzen's signature soulful vocals. James Gaden was on hand to hear more…

I absolutely love 'Cannibals', I've been obsessed with it, playing it constantly! I couldn't believe when I read the press release that this is your 20th solo album. Did you think of it as a milestone, or was it just a new record to you?

I'm glad you're feeling it! It's weird, if I was asked how many solo records I have done, there's actually *more* than twenty. It's hard to decide what counts as a solo record and what doesn't because there are some project things in there… I did a CD in 2008 called Wilson Hawk which was primarily me, but because it was all R&B and Soul, it was such a different style, I put it out under another name. There's things like that, then compilations and stuff, but yeah, it's kind of number twenty, which is crazy to think I've been at this so long. I remember getting my first record deal when I was seventeen and here we are, years later. It's been a long journey and it continues to evolve.

Some of these songs are new and some are songs that have been hanging around a while. Have you collected old material and written new material to fit with it?

Actually it started with the song 'Cannibals'. That came first and then I wrote 'The Enemy'. Usually, when I write a new song that I really connect with, I tend to look in my archives and see what other ideas I have in there that I've yet to develop. I found a couple of songs that fitted into that category. 'Cannibals' was brand new, but when I wrote 'The Enemy', I wasn't happy with what I did for the verse. I went back and found an old recording which had a really cool musical part which I liked. So I used that for the verse, sort of mixed and matched. I did the same thing with 'In An Instant' as well, the chorus and verse was brand new but the pre-chorus and intro had been lying around for a while. I super-imposed the old recordings into the new stuff so there was some trickery involved, that's not something I do very often but it was interesting to do.

You've done the bulk of the instrumentation yourself as usual, but you have brought in some guests. You have dUg Pinnik from Kings X duetting with you. Slightly more left field is the appearance of Billy Sheehan, but on backing vocals rather than bass!

Right! The dUg thing was interesting, we were hanging out at a barbecue at my buddy Jerry Cantrell's house and dUg was there. He was telling me how much he enjoyed the Winery Dogs and that he'd love to work with me. I went home that night and I was messing around with some ideas and I discovered the song 'All In'. I thought that would be a good song to duet with dUg and he did a fantastic job. With Billy, obviously he's a band mate of mine from the Winery Dogs. I was playing him the finished record in the studio, I was there with my girlfriend and Billy was there with his wife. He started singing along in that low voice that only he has and I said "Wow, that's too cool, I've got to have that on the record!" So I handed him a lyric sheet and a live microphone and let him have at it. In the background you can hear my girlfriend and Billy's wife screaming and doing Blues runs, it all made for a real party atmosphere.

You said 'Cannibals' was the first song you wrote and that is the title track. When you write for an album, do you know beforehand what kind of album you want to make? Does a specific song shape it or do you just see what comes out and discard things along the way?

Well, things just kind of come together. Every song comes from a different place. I heard the melody for 'Cannibals' in my head in a restaurant, while I was eating ironically enough! (laughs) I went outside and sang it into my phone and as I was singing it, the whole concept of cannibals came to me. I wrote the chorus and the rest fell into place. The exact same process happened with 'The Enemy' but some songs come from odd places. The song 'You' was something my daughter August played on the piano when she was fourteen. She was playing it over and over and I asked "What is that?" She said "I don't know, I just made it up." I thought it was too good and I recorded her playing it for about seven minutes. I put it on my hard drive and forgot about it until this past summer, when I heard it again and thought "Man, I've got to turn this into a song." I wrote the lyrics and the melody just follows what August played, so the words were mine but the music was really her doing. Then I came up with the concept for the video, found that old house out in California to film at and it was pretty cool.

Does August play a lot of guitar like you, or did she naturally gravitate to the piano?

She does play the guitar, but the piano is her primary instrument. She sings too and she was in a band, the last incarnation of the band had her playing bass so that was interesting.

I think your vocals on this record are incredible. You've got a great tone and your high range sounds fantastic. Did you take lessons or are you a self-taught vocalist?

Thank you man. I did have training, I had some problems at one point in my career about my voice. I had to see someone who sorted me out. I was overdoing it, I ended up with nodes and had to have surgery. I went to see a guy by the name of Ron Anderson, who is a popular vocal instructor in the Los Angeles area. He taught me a lot of things I was doing wrong. It was funny, I first went to him when I moved to L.A. – the first thing the label did in those days when they signed a young artist was to get them a vocal coach. They got me involved with Ron and he really helped me. Somewhere along the line I abandoned his techniques and I ended up in trouble. I actually had two surgeries. I realised I was doing something wrong and I went back to him. Since then, knock on wood, I've not had any problems other than general fatigue, which happens to any singer. There's a lot to be said for singing correctly!

I particularly enjoyed 'Time For The Payment', I thought that was a great track and a great way to round the album off.

Now that song – I had that lying around for a while, I originally was going to put it on the 'Peace Sign' record… or maybe it was '24 Hours'. Anyway, I couldn't work it in. I found it when I went back and unusually, I didn't change a thing. I left it exactly as it was and just put it on there. I think it's quite a different sound for me. One of my buddies checked it out and said "Hey, that's a great song, but you should kill the nylon guitar, that doesn't work." I was like "Right, okay, I'll listen to you because you've had so many successful records…" (laughs) This is the thing, you can get so much advice from people, sometimes musicians don't always understand the artistic vision. Just because someone is a musician doesn't necessarily mean that they are artistic or creative. I talk about this when I do seminars, like the Dog Camp one we do where people can come and hang out with the Winery Dogs. One of the things I talk about a lot is concept in music. It's about why you are learning the instrument, what is your ultimate end game? I think it's to be creative and a lot of people miss that.

Is that why you tend to handle all the instruments yourself on your record, because it's easier for you to lay down what you hear it your head?

Y'know, I like working with people, I don't want to present the image I don't. Obviously it depends on who! (laughs) It depends on chemistry. For me, it's a very natural instinct, I hear an idea for a song, I sit down with pen and paper, I start writing lyrics, I take out the guitar, I sit by the piano, I test it out and try it, see if it makes sense. Once I feel it's at a certain point, I take it into the studio and record it so I can hear it back. As I'm doing that, I suddenly realise I can hear a bass line, the drums should be doing this or there should be a second guitar part there… before I know it, a day or two later, sometimes longer, I have

what sounds like a finished song, what sounded like what I heard in my head. That's the ultimate goal. People ask me how I know when to let go of a song? If it's exciting to me, if it sounds like what I envisioned in my head, then I know I've got a finished song.

What happens when it comes to playing that song live? If you have a song you envisioned and created by yourself, do the band you tour with have freedom to interpret the parts or do you have them stick to the vision?

The songs are generally played as they were written, but my trio have played together so long and we have such a good connection, when we get into the solo sections, those become spontaneous and develop. For example, the song 'Fear' from 'Into The Black', for years we played it straight, as it was on the record. One night, I completely changed the arrangement regarding how long the sections would last. I did a longer intro, I did a long solo at the end which broke down and got louder, there were trade offs and suddenly the song took on new life. I'm comfortable improvising with those guys, I barely have to even give them a cue and they know what I'm doing and they know how to play a supporting role.

Do you know how many songs from 'Cannibals' you will put in your live set?

Not yet, because my solo touring just ended. I just finished up in Japan where I filmed a DVD. As far as new songs go, I did 'War Paint' and 'Walk With Me' from 'The Essential Collection' and 'Cannibals', we did that before the record was released which was fun. I toured for three months, doing United States, Europe, South America, Mexico and Japan so I was pretty exhausted by the time I got home. I'm on a break, going back out with the Winery Dogs in October.

With you having (roughly) twenty solo albums out, is there one you look back on with particular fondness or are you always focused on the current one?

Every time I release a record, I release it with the same enthusiasm as the previous one, so just by nature, a lot of artists tend to say their most recent release is their favourite. With my audience, I find individual songs resonate more than albums. People will comment about certain songs or tell me they are getting lyrics from a song tattooed on themselves, not so much albums. If there is an album mentioned, it's often 'Into The Black' or 'Mother Head's Family Reunion'.

'Mother Head's Family Reunion' was my all time favourite, up until 'Cannibals', which I'd put on a par due to the sheer amount I've played them both.

Cool! 'Mother Head's…' was really my first proper solo record, in a lot of ways. That was the first record I did where I had really found my identity as a player.

Have you started on the next Winery Dogs album?

Actually yeah, we got together last month and threw around a bunch of ideas with the intent of those becoming Winery Dogs songs. That is a different process to when I do a solo record because I don't go into the studio until I have a song. With the Winery Dogs, I have all these little pieces which I have to turn into songs via lyrics and melodies. It's a different process but in the end I think we're going to get something really special out of it.

I'm looking forward to it, I loved the debut. How long did you spend making it? I was under the impression it was quite spontaneous.

A lot of people have said that and I know there is that perception in the press, but the fact is that record was really a year in the making… in some ways longer. You take into account the first time we met up and jammed ideas. Then we got together again, months later. Then we got together after that to demo the stuff, which ultimately led to making the record. We also took some of my songs which were pretty much written and brought them into the equation. So from when we first got together to delivering the record, it was about a year. Then we went out, we toured and didn't really do any writing. I'm confident we'll have a really cool record but it's a different way of working for me.

It must be tough for you all to find time to get together as you all have different things going on.

It's tricky. I don't have much going on except my solo stuff. First and foremost I consider myself a solo artist. That's what I've always done, that's how I've lived since I was 18 years old, that's what put food on the table. Having said that, having the option to work with these guys is very rewarding. Your point that it's tricky to get together is valid. I'm not really doing anything other than the Winery Dogs and my solo work so it's easier for me – it's tougher for Mike Portnoy because he has a couple of Progressive Rock bands he goes out with. He wants to be out there, on stage, touring. For me, probably because of the amount I write, I like a balance. It's a threefold thing for me, the writing, the touring and the staying home, enjoying my house and my family. I have to have an even balance.

'Cannibals' is out now on iTunes, Amazon and CDBaby.com

AUTOGRAPH

Autograph released three seminal Melodic Hard Rock albums in the mid 80s, with 'Turn Up the Radio' being something of a minor MTV hit – I can still remember the classic scene from Miami Vice as the song blasted out the TV speakers.

Over twenty years later the band have got back together (sadly keyboardist Steve Isham died a few years back), with former Jailhouse vocalist Simon Daniels taking over from Steve Plunkett, who was reluctant to get involved again but gave the band his blessing. With new music being recorded and released and a live show at Firefest last October, it seemed the perfect time for Bruce Mee to catch up with founding member Steve Lynch and new boy Daniels.

So Steve, what were the main reasons for the band calling it a day back in the late 80s?

The 80s were over and, simply, it was time. Unfortunately that was the truth. It feels good to be back playing again now though! RCA didn't renew our contract after our three albums were completed although we were negotiating with Epic at the time of our disbandment.

What have the guys been doing between then and the reformation?

I toured doing guitar clinics in twenty different countries... 325 clinics in all. Then I recorded a solo album under my name called 'Network 23'. After that I moved back to Seattle and opened up a music school. Now the time is right to get new songs out there with the new Autograph sound and line-up.

Just how critical was the inclusion of 'Turn Up The Radio' in the movie 'Hot Tub Time Machine' to the band's reformation?

It didn't have much to do with our reformation. Randy and I wanted to do it again and it just kind of fell into place naturally. The time seemed right and the desire was there. The cheques were nice from that movie though, it was unexpected because we made all our music public domain, which means no-one has to ask our permission to use our material, they just have to pay us for it.

Steve Plunkett wasn't interested in getting involved again, but gave you his blessing. What were his reasons?

He said he physically couldn't do it any longer, he said his voice just wasn't there. And he was content with just writing for other people and for soundtracks. We all wish him well! He has done well for himself and we wish him continued success as well.

Simon, how did you land the vocalist role?

I was doing a Jailhouse reunion for fun, playing a couple of shows at The Monsters of Rock cruise in 2013 when a mutual friend told me about Autograph needing a singer. He recommended me to them. I had always loved what Autograph do and I thought it would be a great fit. We started talking and exchanging ideas on the phone for a couple of months till we played together for the first time and then we knew that the chemistry and energy were undeniable.

Have you got involved in the song-writing with Autograph, and if so, how does it differ from Jailhouse?

Absolutely! We are all encouraged to contribute and collaborate. I have been in the business a long time from Jailhouse in the 80s, Agent X, Flood and my solo career, so I have a lot of song-writing experience. I can write various styles of music, but Autograph is actually closer to the genre that is more natural for me - good time Rock n' Roll! I love the sound of Heavy and Melodic Rock guitar oriented songs with a high energy, party, uplifting feel and soul. It's feel good music and it comes from the heart. Of all types of music it comes most naturally out of me on the spot. We write intensively and creatively together and when the juices are flowing we can get results really quickly!

Steve, you play live without keyboards now, giving the band a heavier sound. Do you feel this fits in more with the current scene, and are you happy without keyboards?

It just fits us better now, and for the way we write now. Of course we will always miss Steve Isham but it was time to move on without keyboards. He could never be replaced anyway. The sound is much heavier and I don't think the new material has a place for keyboards anyway.

You played the UK for first time in over 20 years. Was it everything you hoped for, and what are the chances of you guys coming back soon.

Steve: It was more than we expected and were very pleased with the audience turnout and especially their response to us! It was incredible! We want to come back every year to visit with our Brit friends. We will be back, hopefully this summer! We are working on some dates right now.

Simon: It was AWESOME! Great vibe, great audience, great crew and great bands. I had a total blast! Maybe there was some scepticism about us amongst the audience in the beginning, but after the first or second song people just started going nuts! There was really only about 1,500 people there, but to me when I left the stage it felt like twenty thousand! So what's cool about that is we had to earn our position, so if people are sceptical but then the music speaks to them and they have a good time and they jump right on board with the new line-up I get lot of satisfaction from winning people over. I'm very much looking forward to going back to the UK and having a hell of a time again!

So Simon, what are the plans for Autograph in 2015? Are we likely to see a new album at all?

We just released our first single of 2015 called 'You Are Us, We Are You' which is a song about our relationship with the fans. We interact quite a lot with the audience all around and this song translates the mutual vibe. We're tracking our second single 'I Lost My Mind In America' which will be out soon. We are planning a solid couple of months touring in the States and we have interest in bringing us over to the UK again. So lots of writing and touring will happen. There will be an album at some point but most of all we love playing live and we have an awesome time travelling together as a band. Come and see us!

The Stuff of Kings!

An interview with Scottish sensations, The King Lot. Words: Steven Reid.

Keep the name The King Lot to yourself for a few minutes, for before you know it, this is a band you're going to be hearing more and more and dare I say more about as 2015 goes on. A trio from Bathgate, a town somewhere yet nowhere, between Glasgow and Edinburgh, this uber-melodic, ultra-catchy, super-memorable outfit have just released their self titled debut and at the risk of spoiling the review featured elsewhere this issue, dang, it's good! Support slots with The Answer, Venrez, The Quireboys, Big Country, Kobra & The Lotus, H.e.a.t, Vain… illustrate the focused eclecticism on show, but with everything from Def Leppard to The Wildhearts, Little Angels to early (before they disappeared up their nether regions) U2 in this band's armoury, the easier question is, who will The King Lot not bowl over with their deservedly confident attack?

For those of us lucky enough to have experienced the force of nature this trio of power are on stage, it's hard to believe there was a time before The King Lot and yet their drummer, Chris Gillon insists it's so.

"Jason [*Sweeney, bassist and singer]* and Michael [*Fairbairn, guitarist*] were in a band called Planet Boom that created quite a stir in the late 90s and played T in the Park festival amongst other things." The bearded drum pounder is expecting us to believe The King Lot weren't cast from iron especially to play together, and he continues with the ruse. "Jason then formed a band called V9, who went on the win a Nordoff Robins Tartan Clef award in the Hard Rock Café new talent awards. I was in a band called Stillife, who blazed a trail across the UK, also appearing in the new talent awards and in Kerrang mag and supported major platinum selling US artists. Michael moved to New York and played with a band called Telecom who made a name for themselves there, before myself and Jason formed Revolution Babies, which never really got off the ground but created a spark which I believe led to this…."

Maybe this ridiculous rumour of life before The King Lot is true? Really…?

"Jason had been writing some songs and came to both Michael and myself with the idea to put a band together to play and record them." You know, Mr. Gillon is beginning to sound like he means it, so let's push on under that pretence… "It then just naturally evolved into what it is now. Almost all the songs were written as we entered the studio, although we did some of the writing and arranging in SCE Studios in Edinburgh with our producer's input. It took ten days to record…" OK, hold on, we were getting our head's round life before TKL, but this album took ten days to record? Like one less than eleven? "…but mixing took a lot longer as our producer is based in London. We flew him in for recording but then all the mixing was done in London and Hungary." Hungary? Now this is making sense, surely some sacrifice was made to the Magyar's mythical Underworld for such an amazing debut to take shape. Exactly who was this producer…? "Martin Merenyi. Or 'Chopper'as we call him." Finally, a part of this story that has an air of sanity!

So surely the band's master plan was to create an album so chock full of wide, various influences that a spell would be placed under anyone who encountered it? Chris revels the thought process was much more simple. And effective.

"Really the plan was just to create an album's worth of great songs. There are a lot of influences in there which I think just come out naturally that people can hear. We are like a melting pot of the many bands we love. We have pretty much been compared to all of the influences that are in there, so it's all good but we don't sound like just one of them on every song." So did some weird, outlawed group ritual take place to conjure up a set of songs as good as those on 'The King Lot'? Actually it appears one man is to blame…so far "Almost all of this album was written by Jason but we have around ten demo's of new material now for album number two that have been written by everyone both together and separately."

If soul-selling Paganism didn't conjure up the mix of melody and bite on the album, then at some point the band must have sold their soul to the devil while honing their sound on stage…?

"Not really…" Chris continues, almost apologetic that the truth behind The King Lot, band and album, is that they're just astoundingly good at what they do. "…the album was recorded before we even played one show, believe it or not!"

OK. Let's just accept it, The King Lot have created an album that is surely bound to be the best debut offering from a UK Hard Rock outfit all year, purely through talent and graft. So, is the plan more of the same to spread the word of this band as far as voices will carry it?

"Yeah, we just want to get out there and play really." The drummer, who's rather friendly, cheery and chatty actually, says with a steely determination not to waste the phenomenal head of steam his band are building up. "Exposure to the right audiences, we believe, is all we need." And on that point, he is absolutely on the money. However not content with making waves in first Scotland and then the UK, The King Lot possibly have their eye on the long game. Did we hear someone say United States? "Yes…" the stick-smith of no little power and poise confirms. "…it is probably the case that we'll be in the States before long. Our management are working on many tours and high profile shows to take the The King Lot word to the masses. Lots of offers are coming in right now, USA… Europe…. It's exciting."

Indeed it is and on what Fireworks has witnessed so far, deserved. However that's not even to vaguely suggest that the band don't have the work ethic to make things happen; 2015 has been designated the year of tour, tour and tour some more.

"Pretty much, we have built up a great live reputation and want to keep building that and playing to as many people as possible. Festivals and tours, TV performances, you name it…." All of which sounds like thirsty work. No? Chris has the answer to that problem as well. "One thing you can expect from us this year is BEER! We are in talks with a brewer to make our own beer … Flying Skull IPA will hopefully be available in a Rock club or bar near you soon!" And we'll drink to that!!

Seriously folks, The King Lot have what it takes to go the distance and make a huge impact on the UK, and further afield, Rock scene. Head to www.thekinglot.com to get your hands on one of the best albums you'll hear all year.

When the news broke that veteran Rock band Status Quo were going to do an acoustic album, reactions ranged from curiosity to incredulity to moans of despair. However, the stunning 'Aquostic' record garnered excellent reviews and hit number five in the UK album chart. With eleven weeks in the charts so far (bringing Quo's career tally up to a staggering 500 weeks in the Official Album Chart!) the band are set to head out on a selection of 'Aquostic' dates. With their performance at the Roundhouse, televised by the BBC, to be released on CD, DVD and Blu-Ray, Francis Rossi talked to James Gaden about how the band feel about this new weapon in the Quo arsenal. Photos by Christie Goodwin.

Last time we spoke (back in Fireworks #66), you had just released 'Aquostic' – you were really happy with it, but you seemed to be second guessing how it would be received, because it hadn't gone on sale at that point. Last time I checked, it was your best selling album since 'Don't Stop' in 1996, I believe?

Oh, easily, I think we're up to a couple of hundred thousand copies now. That's phenomenal for these days. That would have happened in a couple of weeks years ago, but we can't keep thinking that. It's difficult to keep that out of one's mind, but just the same, it's a mark of great success in today's market.

Do you feel a bit more validated now that the record sales are matching the effort you have put in?

Kind of, but like everything else in this business, you could make the absolute biggest thing of all time, and do you know what you have to do after that? Come up with another one. Since our very first hit, it was all "Yay!" and then "Have you got another one?" Hang on, we're still doing this one! I said last time we talked if it did well we'd probably have to do another one and sure enough, I think there's talk of another one. On this planet we seem to always want new all the time – we'll be up to 'Taken 4' soon, won't we? (laughs)

Have you gone off the idea of another one? Last time you were quite enthusiastic about it.

Yeah, but remember I was still in that zone then! (laughs) The reality has hit now, we've got a hit album. It was a bit like when we had our first hit, 'Pictures Of Matchstick Men'. You have this idea of success, you see it on 'The X Factor', you think if you get a hit, mum and dad will be happy, boyfriend or girlfriend will be happy… but the reality is you wake up the next day and everything is exactly the same, except you sold a product. That's what's happened here. We were all elated with the response, every time we heard the album was still in the charts we were going "Yes!" (laughs) I do play things down sometimes, but it doesn't mean I don't really appreciate what we've achieved.

Is there any reticence about doing a second acoustic album because of what happened with 'Don't Stop' – i.e. you did a covers album, it did really well, so then you had to do another one with 'Riffs', then another one with 'Famous In the Last Century'…

It got to be fucking murder. There was this guy, I won't say his name, this happens a lot in the business… this guy called himself an "ideas man". He came up with the idea of Quo doing an album of famous riffs – the 'Riffs' album. Because he had a mate in the record company at the time, it was dictated to us that was what we would do. I was really livid. The fact we did the first covers album was okay. It was strange, there was a period where a lot of long standing acts were doing covers albums, it seemed like nobody knew what to do anymore! Then it does well, so the logical progression is to do a follow up. I suppose you can say we could have had the integrity to say no, but that's bullshit, we live in a capitalist world. So to do another acoustic album, it might be great. But it might not be able to live up to this one.

Well, you have the option to do more songs re-worked acoustically, and then add in some brand new acoustic tracks to give it a different slant.

I have thought about that, because I think I told you before, most of those songs started out acoustically. I've had a solo album for about a year and a bit which has supposed to have been delivered but I got into 'Aquostic' so much, I thought there was no point doing anything with that. There are a couple of songs on there which are acoustic and I'm wondering if I could use those… then that gets my creative juices going and I end up committed and a few months later I'm thinking "Hang on, how did I get here? I was planning on slowing down a bit, I'm 66!" (laughs)

You've done your first 'Aquostic' gig now, at the Roundhouse. It was televised and is going to be released. Did it match up to how you envisioned it, was it better, was it worse?

It was better. John Edwards suggested we do a preview with some guests. It snowballed a bit and we ended up with about 600 or 800 people. My wife was there, waving at me – I can't wave back, silly woman! There were various people we knew, lawyers, friends, all that kind of stuff. That preview night, fucking hell, it was like playing to dead fish. They just didn't react like a Quo audience. They all loved it, but they aren't a Quo audience – my kids were there, they're just sat watching their dad, you know? So the second night comes up and we were quite nervy. Jo Whiley is just about to announce us, I'm ready and suddenly the roar of the audience goes up. I thought "Shit, we'll never manage that level!" Usually, that roar goes up, we start and Rick's guitar just obliterates everything. Well that's not going to happen at an acoustic show, is it? So that split second, I thought it was a dreadful mistake.

As soon as I sat down though, it was fine. Normally for that first twenty minutes you're saying to the crowd "Come on, come on!" When you're sat acoustically, all you can do is let the song do it. It was relaxed and I thought it was fabulous in my mind. I'm frightened to watch it back though in case it's not what I thought… so I don't look!

I've been pleasantly surprised by the reaction. We've spoken before about die-hard fans who don't like the post 'Frantic Four' era Quo, but even a lot of those seem to enjoy the acoustic renditions.

Quite a lot of die-hards were there on that night. There was one guy, we've known him for centuries, his name is Alan Crook. I always pick on him when I see him in the audience. I didn't think he'd like it because he's a good fan, he's like that loyal football supporter who comes even if he knows you'll be shite. He always turns up and I couldn't get him out of my eye line. After the event he spoke to John and he passed a message on saying "I just couldn't believe it was that good!" He was gone, really into it. Whether that translates into selling loads of tickets, I don't know. They seem to have sold alright. Where it goes from there, I really don't know.

As you said, you're used to coming out with lots of noise and you and Rick doing poses and getting people going. Was it tough to keep that in check when you're sat for the show?

Yeah, I got a hot arse! I've got to sort that, I actually addressed the crowd about it to say it was burning my derriere. It was like there was a torch up it, what the fuck is going on? I realised I was sat on some synthetic fibre and I felt like I needed to shove some ice up my backside. But we don't want to talk about that. (laughs) I think Rick misses that, he prefers the electric stuff ideally, he's that archetypal posing, pouting blonde – he does that really well. I'm only too glad to get away from that. I still do it, but I'm on autopilot a bit, I don't necessarily believe it. I actually enjoyed the fact that you can't do it, you have to concentrate on playing nice and tidy and getting the crowd into the song.

You've booked a few gigs for the acoustic shows, including the Royal Albert Hall on the list, which must be a cool place to play?

I get the impression that 'Aquostic' has maybe been purchased by people who wouldn't necessarily have bought a new Quo electric album. I've had all kinds of messages and texts from people saying they've bought tickets for the Albert Hall. They've never text me to say they bought tickets to see us in Hammersmith! The venue can do that – "It's the Albert Hall, it must be good!" I think in our minds there is a certain element which means you can put something into a certain venue and people don't mind paying more. When we played the Roundhouse, that's showbiz, "Oh yes, the Roundhouse…" It's a fucking railway shed! (laughs) We thought it would be really cheap to tour this, as it turns out, it's *much* more expensive doing this than it is the other thing. If we were just talking about the money, which I love and I don't mind saying that… people tell you they don't, they aren't telling the truth! But we could put on an electric tour and make more money.

How come the acoustic side is more expensive, is it because of the violinists and extras like that?

You have those extra players who are expensive, you have more people moving around so that means more crew, more equipment, more of everything. On top of that, playing those "better" venues costs more. To cover the costs of that, you need to put the tickets up, but because this is a new thing people are a bit "Whoa, hang on…" Up until now, Quo were a safe ticket, you could put us on and X amount of people will turn up, guaranteed. With the acoustic side, nobody can be certain of that until we've done some, so Live Nation, the German promoters, everyone is a bit less sure.

After the acoustic gigs, you have some electric dates coming up. Do you think you'll be reinvigorated for them after the more relaxed 'Aquostic' stuff, or are you worried it might be hard to get that energy back?

I don't know, I'm a little frightened because the last tour we did at the end of the year, that tour we always do, I don't think was our best by any shot. I think we overcooked the set a little, put one or two too many in it… I really don't know, it feels a bit like Pandora's Box, you shouldn't have fucking opened that, should you? (laughs) So whether it's that spoiled little child in me, when he's doing acoustic he wants to do electric and when he's doing electric he wants to do acoustic, I don't know. Once I started playing that first acoustic show, I thought "This is alright." I was more nervous, I noticed my voice faltered a bit at the beginning. Normally you'd correct that stuff, but we left this like the first Quo live album, where it was untouched, just put it out as it was on the night. I'm looking forward to making it better – after one or two shows you can't be where you want to be, you have to play it and play it. I'd really like this to work though because I'm 66, I need a break.

Would you consider doing the shows as a combination, having both acoustic and electric in one night?

A few people have come up with that, and I have a problem with it. You could start with the acoustic, then change the stage over for the electric. I reckon to change things over you would need twenty to thirty minutes and I'm a bit too old to work that long. And the electric set being second, that's the hard work. I'm not convinced the two work together. If you try and put in an acoustic portion in the middle of an electric set, you'd have to change the set up to do it right, so that won't work. Plus that would be even more expensive because you'd have all those other people on the road and you're not even utilising them for the full show.

Gotcha – that's why I do interviews and don't book shows!

(Laughs) It does sound a good idea, but when you break it down you think "Oh shit, yeah…" It's different to when we were touring in the seventies. Everything is much more budget driven and serious now, everyone watches every last penny. It has to be that way, the way things have gone. It's an idea but I can't see how we would make that work – doing an acoustic show, having a break and then thinking "Shit, now we've got the electric show." And if you tried opening with the electric, the audience's ears are shot so you can't follow that with acoustic. On paper it looks great but I don't think the two will marry.

No, perhaps best to keep them separate. It's a pity the Albert Hall show couldn't have been filmed for the DVD, that would have looked brilliant.

Yeah, but from management's point of view, without the Roundhouse show, we might not even have made it to the Albert Hall.

True – have you played there before?

Yeah, way back, we had a manager for a week, he was managing Joe Cocker and Leon Russell. We were put on that show and we were doing a piece where I traded licks with Alan Lancaster. Some bloke stood up and yelled "A load of old fucking rubbish!" at the top of his voice. Without missing a step, we went straight into the ending and went off the stage. (laughs) We also played there in the sixties I believe, on a Pop show with The Move and some others. Someone bet Alan that he wouldn't fall over on stage for a fiver. He did.

(Laughs) Hopefully nobody falls over this time. I do think 'Aquostic' will be amazing in the Royal Albert Hall and it'll be a great way to end the acoustic tour.

Thank you, I do too. You're making my bottom twitch with excitement now!

'Aquostic! Live At The Roundhouse' is out now, on CD, DVD and Blu-Ray. Visit www.statusquo.co.uk for details of the 'Aquostic' tour which runs from the 20th-30th April.

Magic Kingdom, the Melodic Symphonic Metal band featuring wizard guitarist Dushan Petrossi, are back after a five year absence with a fantastic new album 'Savage Requiem'. Ian Johnson talks with Dushan about his song writing, his inspirations and what it's like being a Metal musician from Belgium

Why has it taken so long for a new Magic Kingdom album to emerge; the last one 'Symphony Of War' was five years ago after all?

Basically I was really busy touring with Iron Mask; we played several cool festivals such as The Graspop Metal Meeting, PPM Fest and Frost Rock. And then of course as, you may know, I released two albums with Iron Mask as well. 'Black As Death' (in 2011) and 'Fifth Son Of Winterdoom' (in late 2013), both on AFM records. I started writing this one last year, in January. At the start, I just had the intro to 'Guardian Angels' from back in 2013 but then after hearing all the fans and requests I realised that it was really time to finish a new MK album. I worked day and night for six months to make this new record; then we went to Italy to record the vocals and after being in Birmingham, there in the UK for drums, we mixed in August.

The new album is full of big choruses and this makes the songs really stand out. Where do you start when you write a song; is the hook the most important thing or does the music come first?

Most of the time the vocal melodies are already in my head, then I build everything around that; it could be music and riffs when I pick up the guitar first; keyboards or bass. It's all very different depending on which instrument I pick first.

Even though you're tagged as being a Symphonic Metal band, songs like 'Full Moon Sacrifice' and the title track have a more somber, darker edge to them. Which do you prefer as a musician; the fast paced songs or the slower more intense ones?

I love both. A perfect album needs some breathing space and tempo changes as well; you can't do a full speed metal sort of album really as this would be boring and not diverse enough for us. I like having lots of different moods and feelings with an album. Slower songs could sound darker because they're heavier, but some fast parts could also sound very dramatic depending what my goal is.

Where do you get your song writing inspiration/ideas from?

Most of the time in Magic Kingdom it's my imagination, but it could be movies, books, anything really. For example, 'Full Moon Sacrifice' was inspired by an episode of 'Vikings'. Other songs like 'Ship Of Ghosts' are more historical and that's about slavery and the European merchants who brought Africans to the USA. 'Savage Requiem' is a message of hope, even if it's very personal as it speaks about the people that I loved and who passed away. It still delivers a very positive message; to live your life with passion whatever you do, wherever you are. If you listen to metal, you'll feel better as it brings you an energy and a meaning that so many other 'mainstream' music genres don't have.

The new album has a wonderful production and mix; who handled it?

Thank you! This is basically a partnership between myself and Angelo Buccolierri, a genius mixing engineer from southern Italy who learned from Michael Wagener in the USA.

I'd like to ask a question now about both Magic Kingdom and your other band Iron Mask. The bands both have strong, separate identities – is it hard to stop the two bands sounding like each other?

I separate both bands style-wise. When I write for Iron Mask it would never be as fast and speedy as Magic Kingdom. I agree that both have a similar base but in my opinion they're fundamentally very different as well. I really try when I'm in the writing process to make them both very distinct. In MK, you'd never hear songs like 'The Absence', or 'Dreams' for example; or 'Back Into Mystery' … songs from the last IM albums. It's more hard rock and less heavy.

If one band took off and had a hit album and sold thousands of CDs, would that be the end of the other? Or is there always room for the two?

No, I will always keep busy with both bands because it allows me to express what I can't in the other band and vice versa.

You're from Belgium; I don't know if there is a big Metal scene there. Did you have to move away to find the right people to play with?

Metal isn't really that melodic here; it's all hardcore and black or death metal basically and it's hard to really call it a haven of melodic metal at all. We are the only band here with a professional career and a great label in the style of metal we do, Symphonic metal, and that makes it very hard to find good and reliable musicians for this kind of stuff. We persist with this though because we believe in what we do. You might be interested to know, for example, in relation to this question, that this is why our new drummer is from Rugby, in the UK, ha ha!

Away from the bands I wonder if you've ever considered doing a solo album, Dushan?

Maybe one day but I really have a lot work with both bands at the moment, so I'm not sure. It would probably be something a la Gary Moore; bluesy, hard rock, just for the fun of it.

Back to Magic Kingdom; where and when can we see you on tour and will the UK be on your list of places to play?

We sure hope that we can!! We are working on it!! All will be on our Facebook page! Check it out!

What's next for the band; after promoting the album is it straight back to the studio for a new Iron Mask CD or will it be Magic Kingdom? Five years on the strength of this new album is too long away for any band?

I don't know yet because I have already started on the next Iron Mask, but I'm in the mood for more Magic Kingdom at the moment and we have an opportunity to play with an orchestra for the new material, so this really excites me. Who knows; maybe one album from each! It all depends on what AFM would prefer. Rest assured though, I'm working on it already and we'll do gigs and tour as well, so it could take some time. Don't worry, not five years again though, I'm sure!

THE NEAL MORSE BAND

Last year saw Neal Morse involved in two of the very best Rock albums released in that period, Transatlantic's 'Kaleidoscope' at the start of 2014 and Flying Colors' 'Second Nature' towards its conclusion. This year sees him back in solo mode, well sort of; now it's the Neal Morse Band. Gary Marshall follows up his CD review from the previous issue of Fireworks, with a chat with Morse about 'The Grand Experiment'.

I don't wish to sound cynical but having been a long-term fan of Neal Morse in all his endeavours and having had the privilege of interviewing him several times I feel I know more than a bit about his methods. I was therefore just a little sceptical when I heard that Morse and his band had created their recent album, 'The Grand Experiment' (reviewed last issue), from scratch, nothing prepared beforehand. Could that really be the case?

"Did I really do that? (laughs). Yeah pretty much, the only thing I brought in was the track 'Agenda' that might have made it onto my last solo album 'Songs From November'. Actually, I didn't even bring that one to the table for this album. Mike (Portnoy) remembered it and said we should do it as a band as he really liked it. Other than that I just went with the flow and it was really cool. It's a really cool thing just to trust the people and trust that everything will work out, which I think it did and I'm very happy the way it turned out." As evidence of this new stance the album is credited as being written and produced by the Neal Morse Band.

I put it to Neal that 'Agenda' was probably the biggest departure from what we are used to from him and it certainly wouldn't have fitted in with the overall style of the previous album.

"I'm not sure where that one came from. I just woke up one morning, came into the studio and it just emerged. I wrote it on acoustic guitar and just thought it had a great vibe to it, but I agree that it's different to anything else that's ever come out of me. I'm really glad that the rest of the guys wanted to do it and I think Rich (Mouser) did an amazing mix, as he's done with the whole album."

So, did he feel out of his comfort zone with this approach?

"No, not really" he responds thoughtfully "I used to be a lot more nervous about having everything written before we got to tracking the album and even with Transatlantic I'd have maybe an hour's worth of material to hand at the start of the sessions just in case. Not that there was ever a shortage of stuff with those guys. I think my attitude used to be that if I didn't make this thing happen it wasn't going to happen, whereas now I've learned to relax about so many things because not everything depends on me and that's the attitude I brought to this album. It's amazing really that sometimes working three times less hard brings about a threefold the result. Part of my reason for doing this album was in a way to take a step back and give a platform to the incredible talents who are in the band and give them room to express themselves. A case in point being Bill Hubauer who wrote a lot of this album, the old me probably wouldn't have let that happen (laughs)."

Among the many notable aspects of the album is that Morse shares lead vocals with both Hubauer and Eric Gillette.

"We wanted it to be a real band album so spreading out the lead vocals and the instrumentation was all part of that. Everyone was very involved from the beginning with the writing right through to recording."

Is this the way forward or a one off arrangement?

"I don't know" replies Morse with the air of a man just caught out by the question "I'm not much of a future predictor. I don't know what will happen next or what I will be called upon to do next. There are certain albums one couldn't do in a group setting like a 'Testimony' album for instance. There will certainly be another Neal Morse Band album but I'm just not sure that it will be the next thing that I'll be doing."

Was it a case of just sitting round and jamming?

"Yeah, jamming and kicking ideas around. Usually with collaborations someone has the germ kernel of an idea, like for example I woke one morning during the sessions thinking that this venture is like some kind of grand experiment that we're doing here and I wonder how it's going to turn out and in my head I'm hearing (starts singing down the 'phone) what became the chorus of the title song. Bill arrived early that day and he and I started playing around with a possible chorus but it was kind of slow and a bit ponderous, then when the other guys showed up, we started kicking it around. Eric played the guitar riff faster and then Mike got all excited about the verse and he came up with the structure for that and pretty soon we had a song. The result is something that I wouldn't have come up with on my own."

I wondered if a song like that, one of the shorter ones on the album, would have come together in a single day.

"Yes" affirms Morse "that was definitely created in the room over the course of a day." We then discuss how long one of the epic tracks such as 'Alive Again' took by way of comparison. "I think 'Alive Again' may have taken us three days to write and sketch out." For a lengthy piece of many parts that is still amazingly quick.

The gestation period for the album was a long one; so long in fact that Morse openly admits that dates and times are cloudy in his memory, even to the extent that he questions himself when he recalls that the first tentative steps were taken in 2013. Those early sessions were undertaken without Portnoy who was otherwise engaged and, as anyone who has ever watched the 'Making of' DVDs that invariably accompany any album he's involved with will know, things have a habit of changing when he's on the scene as Morse attests.

"Once Mike joined us things got shifted around a bit as he has an amazing ability to hear how things can be arranged. Even after we'd recorded the album we'd listen back to it and I'd be like "you know what I really don't like that chorus very much", which I think was on 'The Call' and it took me a while to get something I was happy with and which I felt was strong enough. So even after we'd spent days recording it, on the second bunch of days we'd punch into the track and try some different things, then listen back again and sometimes move on to something else then come back and review it the next day. So there were plenty of changes going on all the way through."

Presumably each of the players worked on their parts in their home studios outside of the group sessions.

"After we done the initial writing, the bass and drums had been tracked here in Nashville" Morse affirms "then Bill, Eric and I did our overdubs at home. Mike did some of his vocal overdubs at home too I believe."

Another notable aspect of the album is the guitar playing of Gillette who brings an edge to the material that puts me in mind of John Petrucci (Dream Theater).

"Eric has his own style that he brings to the table; I think he's a real prodigy. He also auditioned for the band on keyboards and for good measure he also plays drums. It's amazing because he can actually play Mike's riffs on drums too. Oh, I nearly forgot, he's got a great voice too as you'll have heard on the album." As the discussion continues Morse relates that Hubauer is equally talented and plays all manner of instruments as well as having terrific vocal abilities.

Morse has always been known for producing great vocal harmonies but I put to him that with this album he's excelled.

"Wow, thank you. It's because Eric and Bill went at it, they did a ton of tracks and really worked the tracks up, so we have our work cut out when it comes to re-producing this material live."

As you will read in the live review of their London gig elsewhere in this issue they pulled it off, with the band producing a near flawless show despite Portnoy being in poor health.

TOMMY DENANDER

Radioactive, the all-star AOR project and brainchild of Tommy (Yes it's more AOR) Denander, is back with its new album imaginatively entitled 'F4UR'. Once again Mr Denander has looked through his address book and called up a plethora of incredible Rock vocalists to help complete his vision and there's also the added bonus of hearing the golden tones of Jimi Jamison and Fergie Frederiksen once more. Ian Johnson speaks with Tommy on the his forty-seventh birthday about Radioactive, Jimi and Fergie, the Legends Of Rock and what still drives him as a musician.

The last Radioactive album 'Taken' came out on the MTM label back in 2005 and then Escape Records released all three Radioactive albums in a special Digi-pack version called 'Legacy'. Why then has there been a ten year gap between albums?

The truth is Ian, that I actually started working on this album almost straight after the 'Taken' album was finished. It takes me about ten years to write and record a Radioactive CD. The first one which I did with the guys from Toto, that came out in '01, was actually started way back in 1991 in L.A. The next two albums took two to three years to complete. I've always felt when I make a record, that I want it to be the best one I can make. So when MTM folded and I didn't have a label for Radioactive anymore, what I did was, every time I wrote a song that I thought was really good, I'd put it to one side and wait until I could record it the right way, the way I wanted to do it. I'm very lucky in that I get to work with all these great musicians, so I use what I call my Bro deal, where I'll play on one of their albums for free as long as sometime down the line they do the same for me. So it's a favour trade system. So what I'd do was stash away songs for a new Radioactive album and then wait and ask someone to come and sing on it later on.

What's interesting about this new album is that it wasn't supposed to sound like it does. I really wanted to do something different this time, so I was writing songs that had a real Progressive almost Dream Theater like sound to them, which was a wild idea. I'd actually recorded the whole album like that but over time things changed and I'd be working with someone who would ask if I had a song they could have and I'd think of those earlier Progressive ones and give one or two away. In the end the whole concept of the new Radioactive album changed. So in the last couple of years I said to myself "Come on Tommy you really have to finish this Radioactive album!" and Khalil over at Escape helped me get my thumb out of my ass and got me working on the album again.

As a songwriter what comes first for you Tommy, the music and lyrics? Or do you first sit down and write a list of singers who you would like to be on a new album, then write a song specifically for them?

It's always the music, the song always comes first. I'm pretty good at writing melodies and the odd lyric but I'm so glad that I have my friend and brother Ricky Delin, who I've known and worked with for more than thirty years, as my writing partner. I'll write the song adding in my thoughts on the melodies and then he'll work his magic on them and we get the songs. When I write with one of the singers who is on the album, I'll send them a rough demo of the song with my ideas and they work stuff out and we put it together in the studio. Personally I always feel it's best if a singer adds their own words/lyrics to a song because they then understand what the song is about rather than interpreting what I've written. So long answer short I write the music, then look for the singers who I'd like to work with.

I'd like to move onto those singers now if I may. How do you go about asking, say Steve Walsh, to work with you? His song 'The Piper' is wonderful and reminded me a lot of 'Power' era Kansas.

This one is down to Khalil again. We were working on the last couple of songs to go on the album and looking for singers for them and a few names popped up but getting them in the studio was a time problem. Then Khalil said "What about Steve Walsh?" I'm such a huge fan of his and of Kansas, I thought this was a fantastic idea, so I sent him the song and all he did was send me an email that said "If that's you playing guitar on the song, then your one of the best guitarists I've ever heard" which is really cool. Then we began corresponding, swapping ideas and I gave him a sense of what I wanted. My friend Chris Ousey wrote a lyric and melodies for the song which I really liked, which we sent Steve, then nothing. After a few days he wrote saying he liked what Chris had done but he didn't really get what the song was all about and he was too old to sing about stuff he didn't understand. So he decided to write his own lyrics and that's how 'The Piper' came about. He was such a professional, when it was finished and he'd heard it he said "I'm not sure about a couple of lines" and he went back into the studio and changed them and he tweaked things until he got it just right. That song is one of the coolest on the CD.

Now what about Jeff (I dress like a school teacher) Paris? What was it like working with him?

Well I've know Jeff for many years and

in my opinion he's the best Rock singer on the planet today. He just doesn't get the credit he deserves either as a singer or as a songwriter. And we've always said to each other that we need to do a new solo album for him and I always wanted him on the new Radioactive album. In fact the first songs finished for the album were the Jeff Paris ones and he also does the backing vocals on the album. So he's everywhere on the album and I owe him my life for what he did on this new Radioactive CD. He really is a star. And a great guy.

Both Jimi Jamison and Fergie Frederiksen are on the new album. Was it a bittersweet thing to be working with them and then releasing the Radioactive album after their sad passing?

It really was. With Jimi, who would have thought he would just drop dead like that? With Fergie though it was slightly different. His songs are about six/seven years old now and were from those Prog ideas I'd had and they were recorded just before his first cancer diagnosis. When I was putting this album together it felt really strange because Fergie's first song, 'Back To The Game', speaks of feeling better than ever before and back in the game, so I mentioned this to him and he said "Tommy you just can't think like that, the cancer is what it is, so don't worry about it, I love the song so just use it". The other track by him 'Just A Man' was actually written for the Frederiksen/ Denander album but never made it on to it. We always loved the song though so that's why it's on 'F4UR'

Jimi's song is a whole different ball game. People who knew Jimi will know he was a lazy motherfucker (laughs), when he was on stage he worked as hard or harder than anyone else, off stage totally different. After we played together at Firefest, we went on a short tour of Sweden and I said "You owe me a vocal" and he said "Yeah, OK". I gave him the song 'Summer Rains' and after he read the lyrics a few times he said "I love it Tommy". But we'd done eight shows in eight days and he was tired, we all were but I knew if I didn't get him in my studio he wasn't going to do anything. So I said "Right, c'mon Jimi we're going to the studio right now". He wasn't happy, I can tell you! So we get there and he says a little pissed off but still with his wonderful humour, he says "Come on, play me the fucking song then!" So we play it to him and his face just lights up, then while I'm setting up the microphone, he listens to it three more times. Then I press the record button and what you hear on the album is Jimi doing that song in one take, no overdubs, no nothing, just him singing from the heart. It's one of those things that will always stay with me forever. Like you said though when I had to pull out the vocal files to put 'F4UR' together, it was a very bittersweet experience.

Anyone you'd like to work with and haven't?

Oh God the list is endless! Paul Rodgers, David Coverdale, Steve Perry and so on.

I'd like to ask about The Legends of Rock if I may. Has it fulfilled all that you envisioned for it when you started the project?

Oh, definitely and more. The first couple of years it was just amazing then a few problems set in and we stopped doing it. Then a few singers sent me emails asking if I was going to do it again and it's become a massive thing now. There's thirty singers I work with, who are icons in the business. I mean come on, what's better than being able to look across the stage and see Bobby Kimball singing 'Hold The Line' or 'Africa' and thinking "Wow! This is my job." It's just so surreal and hopefully over the next few years we'll take The Legends on to bigger and better things.

With Legends being a touring entity have you ever considered touring with Radioactive and how would you go about it? Would you use just one singer or a group of singers?

I've actually been talking about this recently. I've talked to people at Sweden Rock and a few others promoters about putting some Radioactive shows on and hopefully next year we'll be able to put it all together. I'd like it to be an all-star band with a lot of the musicians I've worked with and I'd like to do a tour of the festivals and a few club shows and maybe also record a DVD and a live CD of the shows. Which I think would be a very cool thing to do.

What's next then for the busiest man in rock Tommy – any plans to slow down?

Well as you know I love what I do, I work really fast and I always have something going on, I'm the happiest workaholic there is and as long as I can pay the bills I'm happy. I'm co-owner of a studio here in Sweden and I do a lot of guitar sessions for different kinds of artists. I'm also doing A&R now, looking for new talent, be it Rock/Pop whatever. I'm producing and of course writing songs for other people. My partner and I are also expecting our first child very soon, so things are changing all the time and with a kid I won't tour as much because I want to be an at home Dad. I do have a clear three year plan. I'm forty-seven today and I'm building a new business and a new way of doing things, I still have that passion for playing the guitar that I always had but I'm focussing on other things as well but I love Rock music so I'll always be around doing that.

Oh and tell Keiran and Bruce that they've had enough time off and to get going with another Firefest!

MICHAEL SCHENKER

Guitar hero Michael Schenker recently celebrated his 60th birthday and is showing no signs of slowing down or resting on his laurels: His Temple of Rock spent a large part of 2014 on the road and the band are already about to embark on another world tour to help promote brand new album 'Spirit On A Mission'. Az Chaudhry caught up with Michael to discuss the recording of his latest opus and what the future holds in store.

You finished the Bridge The Gap tour at the end of 2014. What were the highlights?

Wow, a lot of them (laughs). First of all, it ended up going down well, period. All the different countries, the different personalities and the different way in which they respond. But really, all the responses to 'Bridge The Gap' was really the highlight, the audiences were wonderful!

How did you feel when your son Tyson joined you on stage in London for 'Too Hot To Handle' ?

It was great. You know, I had Tyson on stage with us with the Scorpions in Wacken, as long ago as that, but he was doing very well. We played 'Too Hot To Handle' and he was happy. I'm glad I was able to put him in a few gigs.

You must be very proud.

Yeah, he needed a little jump-start but he's worked very, very hard and he really wants to move forward with his music so I hope he keeps rocking!

Moving onto the new album, 'Spirit On A Mission', how did you come up with the title?

Well I was asked by someone what I'd like to be remembered for, and I was saying after some thought, as a spirit on a mission, spreading the joy of music from a place of pure satisfaction, and when it was time to come up with an album title, 'Spirit On A Mission' popped up immediately.

Last summer, when you were recording the new album in Germany, the studio had a break in. I believe some music and guitars were stolen?

It was really, really unbelievable – a real slap in the face. I got a call... four of my guitars were stolen and some music, and I couldn't believe it. We already had some performances down, maybe five lead guitars and a few lead vocals and stuff. Luckily it wasn't any compositions, so basically we just had to get back up and work twice as hard and it worked out great. I guess I look at it as we had a very intense pre-production which made the final outcome even better! (laughs)

So can you tell us about the actual recording process of the album?

Yeah, but it's basically always the same. I mean, I already knew what I wanted to do with 'Spirit On A Mission', to move to the next level and so on the last album I introduced the 7-string a little bit and I also wrote a song called 'Neptune Rising' which is basically Wayne Findlay on the 7-string. He looks like an ocean God, so we gave him a trident guitar so the character was complete. I called the song 'Neptune Rising' because I knew on the new album I was going to use a lot more 7-string and so I did my thing, focused on song-writing and then I asked Wayne to come up with some riffs on the 7-string. The idea was to balance the album out with getting the element of the heaviness, then I added my stuff to it, then Doogie his, and so we created an additional song-writing team. The other seven songs I wrote with Doogie and Wayne was involved in the other five. He is now the member responsible for the 7-string and keyboards, and so he is not the fifth wheel on the wagon anymore, he is a proper member… and he is rising!"

When you first started writing for this album, did you have a plan for how you wanted the album to sound?

The last album was actually completed and released two years ago, so I had two years to prepare for this album. What I do is I play and discover on a regular basis, so I collect bits and pieces, and when it's time to make a record I look at what I have and whatever inspires me first, I start adding things to it, so I was already ready as early as April last year. So I put some stuff down then came back in June and put most of it down at that time, made some arrangements and stuff and gave it to Doogie. Doogie started working on his stuff, and then we had Wayne come in at some point, then Herman doing his drums in a different studio, which is specifically built for a good drum sound. Then Francis came in. Doogie and I would be working on the overdubs and vocals. We just kept going back and forth and it was finally done in November.

My favourite song on the album is 'Saviour Machine' . It's very heavy, and Wayne has a big influence on it with the 7-string, and it's quite dark. Do you have any plans for any more songs in that style?

Absolutely. You know, the whole thing

is this: we're using Michael Schenker as a platform for Temple of Rock to eventually stand on its own two feet. So I think after three albums we probably will have achieved that and so the next album, we now have the song-writing team and we just make sure we have a good balance of songs. I love the fast songs, then we have the other side, the more heavy-weight mid-tempo, so that combination is going to become the Temple of Rock trademark.

So what are your personal favourites from the album?

I personally love 'Live And Let Live'. It sounds typical of the album. And then there is 'Rock City' and 'Bulletproof' … I love all the fast ones, melodic, really high energy with a great vocal. And I really enjoy the heavier ones, because it's a new chemistry as a song-writing team and we kind of got a pretty unique result from that. If there is such a thing as a 30 or 40 year cycle, I'm actually re-visiting my youth and so it feels like I'm in the type of situation at this point where I embrace all the emotions and experiences that I have developed over the years and I can now express that, and it's actually a lot of fun.

On the tour at the end of last year you played 'Vigilante Man' from 'Spirit…'. What was the crowd reaction to that?

Great! Actually right from the beginning it was a better reaction than 'Horizons', which was the faster song from 'Bridge The Gap', but that song has been going down very well. You know, I personally am able go with the idea to bring this out as the first single, it's a good song, but the next one that's coming out, 'Live And Let Live', is going to be our second single on the B list at Planet Rock, and will be introduced for the first time, including a video, and I believe that is a much more exciting song because it's a fast song, very melodic and we have this great video and it's representative of 50% of the album. So I think this is a great song for the second single. I would have chosen it as the first but sometimes it's just simply preference... I don't necessarily push myself too much for what I think it should be because people have different ideas, different preferences, but for me 'Live And Let Live' is one of my favourites.

You co-produced the album with Michael Voss, so what kind of input did Michael have?

Michael Voss and I work very well together. Basically, I have a concept, a blueprint of what I want on this album, but he has additional ideas and he knows immediately what I would like to hear. He knows how to put it into action straight away, and he is a great musician, he plays any instrument and he plays them all very well and has a really, really good ear. I'm surprised he kept on doing the production because after the first album, 'The Temple of Rock', he was the singer but I think he is having fun doing this, so it's very good teamwork we have together.

The current line-up, you've been together now for nearly three years. How has this stability helped you?

It's doing very well, and the thing is that it gets stronger all the time. I did the DVD, which I only did because I didn't know how long it was going to last and I just wanted to have a memory in case it wouldn't last. But then it just went on and on and on and we are still going. And it's still growing, and that's the purpose…to move forward, to have Temple of Rock having its own thing going, and it already has that but using Michael Schenker as a platform and playing the most popular music that's had my involvement as a bridge to move forward and make a transformation to a point, after a few albums, when we play live we'll probably have enough great songs together that will take care of half of the set, and then we can perform some of the "must play" songs. So that is the idea.

Have you planned the set-list for the forthcoming tour?

Well we're going to America, that's another thing, because depending on where we are playing we'll change the set-list. I tried to get this line-up over to America last year in January as the album was coming out in America, but we weren't ready – you need to get the visas and need to plan it. So I decided to just go over there and introduce Doogie but it took until now to make it possible to get the whole band over. So this will be the first time that Herman and Francis and I will be playing on the stage in America, so that in itself is very exciting, and because we haven't been there yet we would like to do a particular set-list for that tour. Then we do some festivals in Europe, and then we will tour Japan where we will do a completely new set-list, and then when we come to Europe and the UK we'll do it differently again.

The Scorpions have just released a new album and are touring. What's the chance of you getting up and jamming with Rudi and the guys?

No, none at all. The only thing with the Scorpions I'm interested in would be the ultimate reunion with all the original members, and the same for UFO. All of this other stuff for me is just wishy-washy. The Scorpions that made all that noise, that was finished after Francis and Herman left, I guess 'Winds Of Change'? Scorpions are basically like a little house that has been put together step by step right from the beginning, and actually I have only been involved in jump-starts, if you know what I mean. I started off the Scorpions with my brother. For the first album I wrote all the songs but I shared them with everybody, and then I went to UFO, and when I came back for 'Lovedrive' it opened up the doors for America, then I left again and came back in '93. So when they needed some kind of injection they were letting me know and asking me if I would be available. Then we did Japan and that helped them a lot, and then we did the UK not so long ago in 2009 where I helped them out.

'Spirit On A Mission' is out now, available on CD, Deluxe CD+DVD, 180gm vinyl (Special DMM-Cut) or digital download.

Why the three year wait between the debut album 'Back' and the new album?

As we weren't on a big label when we released 'Back' we could not afford a traditional promotional campaign. When you don't have an aggressive marketing support behind your work, it all goes slower. We started receiving reviews from Germany and Spain, where we spent some time doing interviews, appearing on radio and TV shows etc. Then we awakened the interest of some British media too, so we went on promoting the album in the UK as well as in other countries, and we also had many gigs. This has all taken a long time and we couldn't start writing new songs until Spring 2014.

In my review of 'Back', I liked the album but was frustrated at how light most of the songs were, when they had the potential to be massive anthems. The new album seems to have gone a long way to updating the sound – was this a deliberate progression?

Yes, absolutely. Our band had already existed years ago with a different name, and we put it back together in 2010. We wrote and recorded the songs immediately and tried to return to the starting point and original sound, which is why we called it 'Back'. As soon as we began performing the tracks we realised we enjoyed the songs even more than on the recording, and the same happened with our audience. So Alfonso, who's not only a band member but also the band's producer, wanted to reflect that on the upcoming work. The fact that some awesome musicians have joined us and recorded their parts on the album also makes a big difference. So that's why our natural progression has driven us towards a more rocking, powerful sound and upbeat songs and why the evolution between one album and the next has been so quick.

How successful was the crowd-funding exercise, and why did you decide to also do a vinyl release?

It was successful in many ways. It goes far beyond the fact that we achieved our goal, even exceeding our expectations. We were also encouraged by the broad support this project received from our patrons and some media and it has strengthened us as a band. It's been an exciting, thrilling and wonderful experience and we loved people getting involved in the project. As for our debut, we also wanted to press vinyl records not only because we love the sound but also because a quite large part of our audience prefer them too.

What is the song-writing process within the band?

Alfonso and I write the songs together only with the voice plus an acoustic guitar – and a thousand cups of tea too! If we like the song in this format, we make a very simple recording so that I can write the lyrics. Once we have chosen the right songs, Alfonso starts producing them and the whole recording process with the rest of the band begins.

On both albums I've detected a definite

THE VAL

The Val first came to my attention via their wonderful song 'A Kiss In A Dragon Night' from their debut album 'Back' in 2012. While many of the songs were more acoustic based, the potential was certainly there, a potential that has been seized and elaborated on by the band for their fantastic follow up, 'Heading For The Surface'. Bruce Mee caught up with lead vocalist Gabrielle de Val for an update…

Heart influence. Would you agree with this?

Yes. We love Heart of course, who doesn't? We love succumbing to almost all kind of influences, especially from the 70s and 80s, from the British folk-rockers Steeleye Span to the first recordings from Mike Oldfield, Pink Floyd, Boston, Kansas, Yes, Robin Beck, Rainbow, Fleetwood Mac, Marillion, the Beatles, Alannah Myles, Queen, Toto…We love taking advantage of what we've learned from them and of the inspiration they bring, but we also try to develop and keep our own personality and sound, our distinctive character. Of course we also enjoy contemporary music but we don't think it could influence us now.

Photo: Raul Blanco Beckham

Have you tried to get signed and go the record label direction, or are you happy having full control, although with not as good distribution?

We haven't made any effort to get signed. We're doing quite well as an independent band, so if a label contacted us we would of course consider their offer but we're not desperately seeking it. In fact we have declined a couple of offers. Having the support of a big company is good in terms of promotion or distribution but you lose your freedom, partially at least. We devote ourselves to music so we can keep doing everything ourselves unless we are offered a good deal.

You have already played in the UK, and are looking at doing more shows later this year. Has the album done well in countries outside of Spain and how have the live shows in UK been?

The album is doing fine outside of Spain, and in Spain too, of course. It's spreading quickly because it's our second work and we are not a new band anymore, so many people from different European countries and the US were expecting the release. The album got a good distribution from the very beginning and this helps a lot too. Japan has been a big surprise for us this time because the album has been having unexpected success there.

We toured the UK with our first album and it was an exhausting but awesome experience with eight shows in a row. We love the country and the audience was amazing. We want to gig the UK again with our new album and we're starting to schedule it now. We can't wait!

Have you learned any lessons doing these first two albums that you will put to good use on album number three?

Sure! We've learned many lessons and we hope we'll always keep learning. That's what life consists of. We've made many right decisions and some wrong ones too, like any other band. When you start a new project you learn by trial and error, and that's exactly what we've done. Many different items are involved when it concerns music. As we are an independent band, we've had to deal with issues like promoting the band, joining the right partners, finding the perfect distribution channels, choosing the perfect venue or finding the shortest way to reach our potential fans for example. Of course we'll put everything to good use on our next album. Regarding album number three, wdon't think it will take us three years this time because everything is happening much faster than with our first album, but 'Heading For The Surface' deserves our attention too, so we'll let the album live it's own life for a while. We've just released the record, it's seen the light in January 2015, so now we're focusing on our shows and won't be thinking of number three until we really feel the need to hear new songs!

Kinesis 4

SATYAGRAHA

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NELSON

In May, the twin sons of American Rock legend Ricky Nelson and grandsons of 30s icon Ozzie Nelson release their latest work. 'Peace Out', their first album since 2010, is brilliantly uplifting, with Matthew and Gunnar once again displaying their songwriting skills and maestro Neil Zaza delighting with his guitar solos. The record, produced by Gunnar, shows his happy state of mind, which he didn't hide either during this phone interview with Mónica Castedo-López. Speaking from California and on his way home, now Nashville where he shares a studio with his brother, the always chatty Gunnar shed some light on the twelve new, tremendously contagious Melodic Rock tracks.

This new album is so uplifting, it has put a big smile on my face from the very first listen.

That was the intention. I wanted it to be inspiring, uplifting and fun, all the reasons why we got into Rock and Roll first of all.

The lyrics seem to be quite realistic. Tell me about them.

I had a very big year last year. My father passed away at 45, and I got to the age he was when he died and I thought: "My gosh, he was so young when he passed". I always looked up to him so much. He was able to have a family and a big Rock career and I felt that I had never made that for myself. Then I met somebody that I fell in love with and she came with a wonderful family as well, so a couple of years back everything changed. From the 'Lightning Strikes Twice' record to this record that's what was different in my life and it really made a big difference. At 45 it kind of made me feel like I had a whole new hope and I'm approaching my music differently. When I was going out on tour before it was fun playing shows, make some money, take it home and pay bills, but it's different when you got a family that you're thinking about. It takes a whole new sense of importance and dare I say a little more nobility. I kind of feel like a hunter that is killing something and dragging it home and it's kind of nice because it affects the song writing in a really cool way. When I was writing, I was asking myself: "When I was a teenager, what would I want to listen to?" And all my favourite bands came back: Boston, Queen, Bad Company, Foreigner, Heart… and I remember my favourite songs from those bands. With Boston it would have to be 'More Than A Feeling', songs that actually put a little bit of a spring in my step, it made me want to go out and attack the world. I decided that on this record that is where I wanted to go. I really like the lyrics on the 'Lightning…' record but I suppose they were not quite as optimistic, just a little bit more pragmatic, but this one is more uplifting. I'm trying to feel good about life and do that with a really cool Rock guitar sound, without any kind of compromise. That is how I'm living my life and hopefully you're going to be able to hear that in the music.

Didn't you write this with your brother?

Actually I did most of the writing on this record, most of the songs are mine. Matthew had a little boy about six months ago and whilst his wife was pregnant I pretty much did most of the songwriting. We collaborated on a couple of the songs, including 'Autograph'. For the singles they're thinking 'Back In The Day' and 'Rockstar'. Those are the videos we are going to be making pretty soon.

Do you have any plans to play live?

Yes, we're actually putting a tour together right now. It looks like we're going to start doing some dates with Loverboy. We did a couple of dates with them last year and it was a really good bill. Those guys play amazingly well still. Mike Reno is one of my favourite singers and because we all had a lot of radio friendly hits it was a very fitting bill.

Would this be for the US only? Are there any plans to come over to Europe and the UK?

The last time we were over in the UK we played Firefest with Mark Slaughter and that was so much fun. So we're planning on going back to the UK. We have different agents in different territories and we're trying to put together a world tour right now.

You mentioned you have been quite busy prior to this release. Your last studio album was in 2010. What have you been doing in the interim?

We've been trying to balance our time between our private lives and working on our father's estate. It looks like he is going to be getting a lifetime achievement Grammy this year so we're doing all our meetings with the Grammy people and with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and trying to put together a big concert event this New Year's Eve coming up, that was the anniversary of his passing from the plane crash.

Talking about your dad and coming from a family of successful artists, do you and your brother ever feel the pressure to live up to their achievements and that people will judge you on the basis of what they achieved?

That's a great question. Yes and no. I think my father and my grandfather set up pretty high standards but it was only a friendly rivalry or goal. I don't know if anybody is ever going to be able to do what my dad did. He sold 280 million singles in his life. It's so unbelievably massive that if we were to compare our achievements or accomplishments against his, we'd always be disappointed but what he always taught us was to do the absolute best you can, to write the best songs you can, play with integrity, practice and always try to push yourself. I love the 'Lightning Strikes Twice' record but I like this record even more. I love this record. I had so much fun playing it and I know it's normal for people to be lost in love with the last thing they did, but I think this record is really, really solid. I think my dad would be proud. I am proud, my family loves it and I haven't been able to play any of those tunes for anybody, unless we're talking about occasionally I'd play one acoustic live as a premier or a preview for people and the response is really great.

When we did our very first record, 'After The Rain', the theme was to inspire people not to give up. These are really challenging times to live in, I watch CNN and I see what is going on all over the world and there's some scary shit. I'm not political at all, but I get to, unfairly perhaps, escape into songs three minutes at a time. That's what I intended with this record, for it to be an escape for people to take their minds off what's troubling them, what's bothering them, the stuff in life that sucks and just plug in and kind of escape. My favourite records when I was growing up did the same thing to me.

Your debut album 'After The Rain' was released in 1990, which makes this the 25th anniversary of its release. Are you planning on doing any special celebrations?

We are and it's a great question. We've actually been talking to the first label that released that, Geffen (now UMG, Universal), about doing a re-master and a re-release of the 'After The Rain' record with a bonus cut. I hope that all works out.

That album sold millions of copies. How do you see the change from back in the day to now and what do you expect from the new album?

It's so funny because we wrote a song called 'Back In The Day' and it's one of my favourite songs on the new record. What I can say is that music seemed to be better back then, didn't it? When I want to plug into things, for the most part I go back and listen to my favourite hits from back in the day. I guess the way I feel right now is that kids nowadays have such limited access to watching their music. We had MTV. How much fun was that? Nowadays you don't have that anymore. I miss that. We're kind of back to when music started. I got to see my dad's career in the 50s and it was one single at a time, it wasn't about albums back then. In the late 60s/early 70s it became about albums and concept records are some of the best albums you would ever hear, like the 'Dark Side Of The Moon'. Now with downloads and the short attention span that everybody has, it kind of has gone back to singles. What I hope is that someone is going to hear a single from this record and they are going to go back and listen to the whole album and go: "Gosh, why can't everybody make a whole record full of singles? Wouldn't that be nice and not worry about buying a single at a time at $1.99 each?" Just go out and buy the whole record, that's what the intention really was.

You and your brother have been working together all your life. Do you agree that there is that twin connectivity?

Absolutely! But for every similarity my brother and myself have, there is also a difference. We have very unique personalities, but they really compliment each other. We've been working together for so long that my brother knows what I'm going for if I'm half way through writing a song. He's got this really annoying knack about coming up with this small idea in a song that makes the whole song. I wish I had that gift. I'm pretty much the solid worker, and Matthew just casually walks in almost when it's finished and he goes: "You should change that lyric to this, and the title of the song to that". But it's a good thing. It works!

When it comes to touring, who will be in the band?

It's going to be Bobby Rock on drums, our original drummer, Neil Zaza, who is so wonderfully melodic in his playing that he makes the guitar sound like a vocalist. He's absolutely brilliant, on guitars and Joel Hoekstra, who was in Night Ranger and is now in Whitesnake replacing Doug Aldrich, also on guitar. He's absolutely fantastic and you should look him up, as he's also got some solo records and he's absolutely wonderful.

Do you have any messages for the readers of Fireworks?

I want to thank everybody for all the incredible support. Nelson is a really interesting band as we are one of these bands that a lot of people consider too light for Metal radio and too heavy for Pop radio, but the only thing I ever intended to do was be myself and I can't think of a better record that really shows everybody who I really am, who we really are, than the 'Peace Out' record. I hope it makes people feel good, if it does, then I've done my job.

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TERRA NOVA

Terra Nova is back! Still driven by the creative duo of the Hendrix brothers, the Dutch Melodic Rock act has released their eagerly awaited album 'Reinvent Yourself'. It prompted Alexandra Mrozowska to chat with Fred Hendrix about the circumstances and content of the release as well as many other things Terra Nova.

Your new album 'Reinvent Yourself' is no departure from your usual Melodic Rock style. Was there any temptation as far as sound experimentation was concerned?

Well, a little bit in the guitars. We used a Fender Stratocaster with its original pick-ups, something we wouldn't normally do because it's simply not heavy enough. But it worked out quite well, especially on the songs 'Jenna' and the Japanese bonus track 'Till The End'. Terra Nova stands for Melodic Rock, that's how it is and will be. It is not that we don't appreciate other kinds of music, we love them, from Country music to Pop music and other genres… even Jazz and Classical music. But it's our fans who expect us to create good Melodic Rock and that is what we're trying our best to do, so we try not to wander too far off the our main sound. When the first two Van Halen albums were released years ago I just loved the guitar sound, but from the third one on Eddie started experimenting with new sounds which took me quite some time to get used to. So I try to take that in consideration when I record an album. If you like pie with whipped cream you don't order it without.

What were your major lyrical and musical inspirations while making the album?

Stories about kids with guns in school are headlines very often these days… people who are simply crazy, or religious fanatics. Otherwise the things and people in my life, like my wife and kids and friends. Musical inspiration mostly comes from the classic masters as Journey, Styx, Boston, Van Halen and so on.

If you were to put another Terra Nova 'Best Of' compilation together, which songs from 'Reinvent Yourself' would make it?

Its always hard to choose songs but I would say 'Promises' and 'Jenna', because I think they should be the singles on the album. But on the other hand 'Meltdown', 'Shadow Man' and 'Rock Army' have to be on the 'Best Of' as well because they represent the uptempo Rock style Terra Nova is known for.

You mentioned that the Japanese edition of the album will contain a bonus track entitled 'Till The End'…

'Till The End' is a ballad written for my wife Simone. The Japanese record companies always want an extra track in the hope the Japanese fans don't go shop outside Japan where the albums are cheaper, plus they hope that fans outside Japan will buy the Japanese version including the bonus track. If there is no extra track for them they will demand a release several months before the rest of the world. They have always done that… it's simply marketing strategy.

Can you elaborate on the concept behind the lyrical content of 'Reinvent Yourself'?

'Reinvent Yourself' is about trying to evolve over and over again. It's the point of view most of the songs were written from. With every album you're trying to transcend the previous one, which is always a hard nut to crack but that goes for life in general as well. We're always trying to improve ourselves, even if it's not consciously done. 'Meltdown' for example is about the crazy phenomenon of kids with guns in school killing their fellow students. Also, moms and dads who fight and end up killing their offspring and then themselves, and the fact that we live in a crazy fast-paced world with so much pressure that sometimes people snap and are made to do crazy things… plus the fact that we have religious fanatics terrorising the world.

Your new album is out via MelodicRock Records. Are you satisfied with the label, especially after leaving Frontiers?

We are proud MelodicRock Records gave us a chance to release our music. The Frontiers adventure came to an end as they didn't like our demos. You got to follow your heart when such decisions need to be made, so it was time to find a new record company, which is not easy these days. Good thing for us MelodicRock Records still gives bands like us the opportunity to spread our music.

In order to collect funds for a video you launched a fundraising campaign via Sell A Band…

Well, in the past record companies were the ones who funded the complete campaign including videos and tours. Videos especially are very important to get your stuff out and this only happens with a few big artists these days. Record companies simply don't have the financial means to fund stuff like videos anymore. The Melodic Rock market is getting smaller and smaller every day, so bands have to find tools to get their stuff heard. Sell A Band is one of these tools. The great thing is that you collaborate with your fans to get the job done.

Has Terra Nova evolved in terms of musical prowess, songwriting, or perhaps attitude throughout the years?

I think life itself created the changes. You grow older and see things in a different perspective or from a different angle. There are things you didn't appreciate when you were young but do now, as well as the other way around. Writing music is an emotional process which is a reflection of your ordinary life. The things you do or don't do. The choices you make. The experience you have when you grow older… All this will finally shape your songwriting. Of course, there's also experience, the craft of songwriting itself. It could have been possible that we released albums every five years, but I don't need five years to write an album. As a matter of fact I would be able to produce about four or five albums per year if it was necessary but the expenses to do so are too high and also, fans would be flooded with songs and that would probably be too much.

What about the side project Terra Nova members were involved in, the female-fronted Two Of A Kind?

Well as matter of fact there are plans. I spoke to both women two weeks ago and they are both looking forward to doing a new album. It is one of my favourite projects, so I am really looking forward to doing the album and a few songs have already been written. If Frontiers had agreed there would have been a new album years ago.

What is Terra Nova currently up to?

We are currently planning a few gigs in the Netherlands and will see how it will go on from there. Touring is expensive, so we will plan it carefully.

JIM PETERIK & MARC SCHERER

Ian Johnson isn't usually a person who gets worried when it comes to doing interviews with singers or musicians for Fireworks. It's happened only a handful of times that he can remember however the Fireworks stalwart admits to being pretty nervous when he placed the call to the Legendary song writer/musician Mr Jim Peterik. After a few minutes in his calming presence however, the two got on famously with Jim singing new and old songs down the phone, whilst discussing his new album with Marc Scherer called 'Risk Everything' and much more besides.

I'd like to start out by asking how you and Marc Scherer got together. Whose idea was it and where did you meet?

We've actually been crossing paths for about twenty-years, Ian. I'd been in studio A somewhere with Survivor and he'd be in studio B with his band, and I'd hear him sing and say to him "Dude I have got to get your number" and we'd swap contact details. When I'd left Survivor and I was looking for a singer, I always thought of Marc but because ten years had passed I just couldn't find the phone number he'd given me. Then what happened was, I have a home studio which is just down the hall from my bedroom and my engineer and friend Larry Millas, who founded The Ides Of March, was working in the studio playing this band over the speakers, and I hear through my wall this voice, Marc's voice and I just said "Wow!" I asked Larry who it was and he told me, so I got his number again and for the third time in my life I met Marc and I said to him we have to work together. At that time I needed to do some demos for the new Pride Of Lions album 'Immortal' and asked Marc if he would do them for me and Serafino over at Frontiers, he said yes and boy did he nail it. We had, I felt, a real chemistry and we enjoyed working together.

So of course the next thing was for us to make a record. Trouble was I find that I can only write a number of songs in a certain direction in any one year and as we'd just finished the POL album I was all AOR'd out. You can burn out if you don't have a rest from one genre to the next. So I said to Marc lets do something like a Michael Buble record and he goes "OK why not, lets give it a go." So for the next six months we worked on that soft Swing Rock stuff Buble does, though I don't think Marc or I were feeling it, it wasn't the right thing for us but I needed the time to recharge my batteries, you know? Then one day I said to him, "You know what Marc. you're a classic AOR singer so let's stop fucking around and lets do a Rock album". So I cut a couple of songs with him, 'Chance Of A Lifetime' was one, I can't remember the other now but we sent them over to Serafino at Frontiers and said "What do you think?" Serafino comes back to us; "Are you kidding, we've got to do a record!" and that's how Peterik/Scherer and my working with Marc came about. With this record I really got in the zone and songs were pouring out of me, because for me the singer is God when it comes to an album. I need their voice to inspire me as a writer and I've worked with some of the best – Dave Bickler, Toby Hitchcock, of course my friend Jimi Jamison and Marc right now is my muse. And when I work with guys as good as this it brings out the best in my song writing.

So how were the songs written for 'Risk Everything', were they all co-writes or was it just you doing the writing?

Well on this album it's mainly me but there are three co-writes and on those songs Marc helped a lot with the lyrics and melodies, by coming to me and saying "What if we do it this way Jim?" or "Maybe if we use this harmony instead of the one it's got", which made the songs more his own.

You've been around for a while now Jim, so what still inspires you as a song writer? Is it family, history, everyday life, what after all this time drives and informs your song writing?

(Laughs) Wow! That's a big question. To reiterate I need the singer first and foremost, then it's really about staying on my game. I can't stand it when you see people who hit fifty and then for some reason lose their fire, to me everyday is a challenge and I write a song every day to prove to myself and to the whole world that I can still do it. I still believe even though I'm so proud of all the songs and work I've done over the years, that my best songs are still to be written, that I still have something to prove as a song writer. When I left Survivor a lot of people wrote me off saying why did he go and he'll never make it on his own. So it was a case of me saying "Well watch this fucker" and proving not just to them, but to me as well, that I could still write great songs. That attitude has helped me a lot over the years. My actual song inspiration comes from a very spiritual place, some days I'll be driving down the road and a melody will just pop into my head and I say thank you God, I'll have that. I'm always trying to harness that force of nature, that essence, whatever it is that inspires people to do their best. Also I've been married for forty-three years now and that has always given me a great grounding and I've never really bothered about the

Rock 'n' Roll lifestyle, so that always helped me as well. In the end though it's always been about proving myself.

I've really enjoyed listening to the new album Jim, songs like 'Cold Blooded', 'Risk Everything' and 'Thee Crescendo' are some of my favourites. With a song book as big as yours, do you have favourites or are they like children and it's too hard a call to ask you to pick favourites?

Thank for the compliment, always nice to hear that other people like what we're doing, it means the world to me. I do have favourites, on the new album you mentioned 'Cold Blooded' which is I think a great song and we've shot a video for it. Wait 'til you see Marc on stage, he's got the moves. I played that song to a friend of mine whose in the business, who said to me "You know what Jim, that's the closest you've come to a Survivor song since you left the band", which was a lovely compliment. I especially love that song because most of the time my songs are about love and the upside of love; all sweetness and light but 'CB' is all about a cold hearted bitch and has a darker lyric than my usual songs. It reminds me of 'Broken Promises' or 'Burning Bridges' something like that but when I wrote it I didn't have Survivor in mind. 'Risk Everything' is another song I love, my family and I had gone to Italy on holiday, we're in Rome and for some reason different cities bring out different things in me as a writer, and we're walking down the Spanish Steps when the chorus of 'Risk Everything' pops into my head. As we're walking through these small streets of Rome I'm singing this song into my iPhone, recording the ideas and then we come out in front of the Vatican and I'm looking at all this wonderful art and architecture and then 'Thee Crescendo' comes to me. I love that melody and I'm not sure if it's sacrilege but that song was written while I was walking around the Vatican. Older songs I've written for bands such as Survivor, 38 Special, Cheap Trick etc all have special places in my heart but there are too many to go into really.

I mention in my review that for whatever reason your music makes people smile.

Thanks so much Ian, that really means a lot to me. Maybe it's because when I'm writing my music down, I'm smiling myself because writing songs makes me happy. When I was a kid growing up it was always the songs with great melodies like 'Memories Are Made Of This' by Dean Martin or 'High Hopes' by Sinatra, songs like that, which may have been a little corny but boy they had great melodies and they always made me happy. So I think that stuck with me and I always wanted to write songs that made me and I hope everyone else happy as well.

You're playing the Frontiers Rock Festival in Italy on the 12th of April, with Pride Of Lions. I know Marc is doing a guest spot with you, so can you tell us what you'll be doing with him and POL.

With Marc we'll be doing three new songs from the 'Risk Everything' album, with Toby and Marc dueting on 'Desperate In Love'. Then the rest of the set will be mostly Pride Of Lions songs with a few special Survivor songs as well. We hope everyone who is there will love that. We're really looking forward to the show.

After the festival will Peterik/Scherer go out on tour?

Actually there's more of a chance that it will be Pride Of Lions going on tour. Mainly because we spent what ten, twelve years building up the POL name and the funny thing is that when we were asked to do the Frontiers Festival it was touted as a Pride Of Lions tribute to Jimi Jamison, which to tell you the truth I hadn't noticed. Fans from around the world got in touch with us and Frontiers and said we want to see Pride Of Lions doing Pride Of Lions songs. Serafino and Mario at Frontiers were shocked that fans wanted POL songs, rather than us doing some Survivor songs as a tribute to Jimi.

I said "Why don't we record some songs for an album?" which is now called 'Torch' as a tribute to both Jimi and Fergie Frederiksen. One of the things that inspired me to do this was I played at Melodicrockfest and I saw a band there that I'd not heard of before called Work Of Art and they just blew me away. Especially their singer Robert Sall, who reminded me of a young Jimi Jamison. So I wrote this song for the 'Torch' album and WOA sang it for me and they did a great job. It was such a thrill for me to hear Robert's voice on one of my songs. From there on I compiled songs for this album, using singers like Marc and Toby of course, Bobby Kimball, Mike Reno, Bill Champlin, Kevin Chalfont, Lisa McClowry and David Pack. All of them together in my studio at the same time to lay down the vocals. I have nothing against MP3 file sharing to make albums but I think if you can get the people into the studio at the same time, that's when the magic happens. The album has nineteen tracks on it and will be available at the festival, there's only 500 and I do hope everyone likes it. So if you are coming to the show, please grab a copy and come and say hi.

My final question is did you ever think you'd still be making music after all the years you've been in the business?

To tell you the truth, it's all I ever wanted to do. I'm not good with numbers or keeping to schedules, I need someone else to sort all that out for me. I had someone call me fifteen minutes before you rang, just to remind me to be ready for your call! (laughs) I would have probably started doing something else! My head is always in the clouds writing new songs, so my focus isn't on what you'd probably call everyday things. I'm blessed because I was fourteen when the Ides Of March did their first paying gig and we all got paid $5, which was in 1964. I found out pretty quickly after that, as a song writer you got paid more than if you were just a musician. So from then on I was a songwriter. Did I ever think it would lead to what it has done? No, never. It's all I've ever wanted to do, make music, write great songs and perform them for people. It's my life's mission and one day I'll be ninety-three on stage somewhere, playing a song and I'll drop dead, which is how I want to go!

Steve Hackett

Interview by Gary Marshall

I never need a second invitation to chat with Steve Hackett who has been a musical hero since I discovered Genesis way back in 1973. Having spent the best part of three years recording and touring his Genesis Revisited enterprise, Hackett remained creative throughout the period composing and recording his wonderful new album, 'Wolflight', (reviewed last issue) during gaps in touring commitments.

After the massive investment in time and energy with 'Genesis: Revisited' I wondered whether it was good to get back to being Steve Hackett the solo artist?

"I want to keep making albums," asserts Hackett in response, "it's important to me to carry on being creative. I do like to make album after album and be making decisions; I couldn't work at the pace of some people who produce one album every ten years. I don't enjoy the recording process that much, but one of the joys of being a solo artist is that you alone get to make those decisions really quickly. Also, it's too early in life to be pensioned off even for something as glorious as those golden moments (Genesis) and it's nice to do something new as well."

Does he see a return to 'Genesis: Revisited' shows at some point?

"I'm not thinking that far ahead at the moment and for now I'm concentrating on the solo stuff and all that that entails; which songs are performable live, which is a very hard choice with so many albums to choose from. Some early stuff is being remixed by Steven Wilson, which will be out in a box set later in the year so I need to give thought to introducing or reintroducing some of that."

It appears 'Genesis: Revisited is something of a doubled edged sword with Promoters twisting his arm to include as much Genesis material as possible in his solo set.

"I don't want to be pensioned off and just thought of in terms of the Genesis material, but to be seen as vital and coming up with new stuff because I am moved to do new stuff, it's not just about selling CDs for me, it's about being creative.

"The plan is to present the 'Wolflight' shows in a different way with some Surround Sound; some things will work better than others, the non-percussive elements, the floaty things and effects work particularly well in that medium too. That's technology we've yet to address but that's the plan." Yet another sign that Hackett is not prepared to sit on his laurels or rely on past glories.

Hackett is more than just a guitarist; he's a song-smith where the song is more important than his guitar.

"They are probably of equal importance" is his considered reply, "it's the details of songs that really turn me on."

Hackett recently visited Iceland and performed with a massive orchestra and choir, which flies in the face of the advances in technology.

"Technology presents so many opportunities," confirms Hackett, "it also means that studios are getting smaller and samples are so very good now you can reproduce almost anything. To get convincing orchestral moments I use a combination of the two, samples to give it weight and real musicians to provide the definition. I'm proud of all those orchestral salvos. I'd love to use the full orchestra but it's a small mortgage job every time. There's the immediacy of working with samples; I use them as a sketch initially yet often that's what ends up on the finished track; it's one of the miracles of modern science frankly."

The track 'Loving Sea' is a flavour of Hackett rarely heard before, strummed acoustic guitars.

"For years I didn't really understand strumming, I'd spent so much time on lead work that I didn't know how to write a song with strummed guitar. Funnily enough I've started work on the next album and there's another song in that style. So after all these years I've finally learned how to strum!" he laughs. "The track came to fruition as a result of a holiday in Mexico. It was a sunny day, we were on a boat going in and out of the mangrove forest; it was the first time I'd seen dolphins, hearing them breathe was incredible. The melody just popped into my head and it got

refined into a song. By the time we got back to the hotel I was writing it out."

I remind Steve that at the album's playback it was Jerry Ewing (Classic Rock magazine) who commented that the album sounds like a musical journey as they flow together so well.

"That's good to hear. I think it's possible to link any two pieces of music no matter how different they may be provided you have a strong enough bridge passage or something strong enough atmospherically. I write acoustic pieces that are tailor-made to link rockier things; I do this thing where I'll refer to a previous track with an acoustic echo and line it up with a key change perhaps in order to take it into the next thing. There's 'Earthshine' on this album that turned out to be the glue that links the tracks either side of it; the thundering 'Corycian Fire' and the acoustic based 'Loving Sea."

Wolflight is a reference to the hour before dawn is the time when Hackett seems to be at his most creative.

"I tend to find that if I wake early and realise I'm not going to get back to sleep because my brain is working I will get up and find it to be a particularly creative time; it's a bit like down time in the studio when you're not expecting too much of yourself. Some of my most cohesive ideas have come at this time."

The aforementioned 'Corycian Fire' features another new element to the Hackett palette, a massive choir element. It transpires, unbelievably, that technology is behind this too.

"It's done with software that sings consonants and vowels," he confirms, "and we think it was originally designed to sing in Latin but it means you can make up your own words which then becomes a jigsaw piece choir really. The phrases are all ours as are the harmonies but the dynamics are really convincing. It's singing in ancient Greek which is courtesy of Jo (Hackett's wife), who is a great grecophile."

Another new aspect to his sound is the almost Dream Theater-esque section late on during 'Love Song to a Vampire', I wondered if Hackett was influenced by Prog Metal.

"There's no influence from that, but there's an aspect of the riff that is more elemental to the Slavic or Norse moments of Grieg or Tchaikovsky. That was the kind of sound I wanted to bring to the piece."

Hackett isn't known for this style but it seems that much of that is down to expectations.

"If you aren't careful you can always end up doing stuff that is characterful and melodic; if people ask me to play on their albums they want me to play something slow and majestic but I did start out as a Rock guitarist and I can't help wondering if I'd been born five years earlier perhaps the Blues boom wouldn't have died out on me and I might have been doing a lot more of those moments. I can deal with the fast and furious stuff it doesn't always have to be melodic but I think it's nice to have contrasts."

That to me is the watchword for Hackett's considerable output both solo and with Genesis; contrasts.

"Exactly," agrees Hackett "I think the Genesis material was deliberately full of surprises, the best things certainly had surprising moments; I think we allowed things to meander. I used to think that we'd allow it to meander too much but on reflection that worked very well and to allow a song to slip off the rails was a good thing as sometimes you have to break things down so you can to build them up again."

Given how quickly some of the songs on the album switch between electric and acoustic guitar, and back again, I wondered how he was going to achieve this live.

"I was thinking I might have to take a leaf out of Steve Howe's book and have an acoustic mounted on a stand so that one can move very quickly between the two, it can be done. It also depends on whether I have another guitarist in the band, with the Genesis stuff it often requires someone who not only plays bass but twelve–string as well, or in our case having worked with some of the newer technology both Lee and Nick have used the Variax on a twelve- string setting; that's worked well. But, these are things I have still to work out, and how much of the new album we want to do, how much of it can be done and how we make those joins and what, if anything, needs to be re-arranged to make it work."

So is he pleased with 'Wolflight'?

"I got a good feeling before this album in a similar way to that before 'Spectral Mornings' in that I'd been doing a lot shows with a band that hadn't recorded an album together and we were getting a great response to playing materiel in the set that would become part of the 'Spectral..' album and I just had a really good feeling even before we started recording it. When it was done I felt really proud of it and having a band for the first time and in a way it's that same feeling with this album. There is something delightful in the air, which isn't even about how well the album does in the market it just seems to have its own life somehow. I've been striving to do something like this for a while and to come up with musical surprises. It has enough weirdness in it to be interesting but at the same time not enough to lose the listener. One needs those tributaries whilst keeping people on the river, as it were. You do need those digressions but at the same time there needs to be something solid at the centre of it; accessible is a terrible and overused word; I think emotional would be closer to where I was heading with it."

I don't think he has anything to worry about on that score as any Hackett fan is going to revel in this latest offering as it has all the ingredients that make his fans love what he does.

"The idea is to keep the music coming and hopefully if the listener doesn't like one moment there will be another one along in a moment that they do like. I see the album moving between genres or as scenes from an imaginary film where if you don't like that bit here's something else you will; people will be attracted to different elements. Some may be drawn to the Greek idea ('Corycian Fire') or the Mexican one ('Loving Sea') or 'Black Thunder' which is about a slave rebellion which is Bluesy with a Gershwin aspect to it too towards the end. It wanders into Jazz territory too."

Finally, I put before him the question of the appalling Genesis documentary shown on BBC4 and which has now made it on to DVD in extended form. Having got my own rant of disgust over I ask Hackett for his thoughts on the subject.

"I've had an awful lot of a correspondence which has been a cross between complaint and condolence and funnily enough the guys from Genesis also wrote to me and said sorry that it came out the way it did. It was intended to be definitive but ended up being patchy." I counter that comment with the observation that he's being overly generous and gracious. "I was trying to be diplomatic," he laughs.

Did any of the guys from Genesis actually come and see his 'Genesis Revisited' shows?

"Not as far as I know, not unless they slipped in in disguise; but they'd be more than welcome. I wouldn't want to embarrass them by offering the Royal Box or anything."

Had any of them commented on the enterprise in keeping the Genesis Museum open (a phrase used by Hackett at his Hammersmith Apollo gig)?

"I think publicly they are unlikely to say anything, the Genesis policy seems to be 'no comment' and I think it's in the nature of being British. If they thought it was rubbish they wouldn't say so and if they thought it was brilliant they wouldn't say so either. I would be interested in what they thought about my re-records of the material and how they feel about some of it having orchestra over it or starting tracks with nylon guitar that wasn't on the original or about having lots of different singers on it. I guess I'll never really know; at the end of the day we all have respect and love for each other. You cannot ignore the combined work that that group of people were responsible for."

A fitting, well-made comment on which to end our chat.

A longer version of this interview can be found on Rocktopia.com

Eden's Curse have seen singers and band members have come and go but now they've settled into a stable line-up and have a brand new live album called 'Live With The Curse' to promote. The album itself is almost two hours of fantastic Melodic Metal, played in front of a rabid Glasgow crowd. Ian Johnson talks with the band's bassist and driving force Paul Logue.

I love the old school approach of releasing four studio albums, then recording a live album. It's what bands used to do but not so much these days.

I'd like to take the credit for doing it this way but the definitive answer to your question is no, we didn't plan on intentionally doing it like that. What kind of happened was that after we'd changed singers the first and second times, fans would contact us and say please will you re-record some of the older songs with the new singer Nikola Mijic, and we didn't fancy doing that. Personally I have a lot of albums here at home that have been re-recorded by newer line-up's of my favourite bands but they don't hold water for me. Personally I always prefer listening to the originals, so we didn't want to re-record older material with the new guys in the band. So that's really where the idea for the live album came from, and the actual idea for the live album came from AFM, our record label.

Was it hard for the band to pick a set list that would satisfy everyone?

Actually it's always hard for us to pick an Eden's Curse set list. We have a lot of material to choose from and because we all love different songs for different reasons, choosing what to play is tough. I'll even say this, to this day some of my favourite songs by Eden's Curse, songs I'd put in my top ten, have never been played live by the band. A set list depends on what you're doing at that particular moment, what tour you're on, whether you're headlining or supporting someone, whether it's in a club or festival, it's all choices and you just hope you always make the right ones. With this album, because of the tour we'd just finished, we wanted to keep most, if not all of that set because it was rehearsed and gig ready. So we made sure that we used the May tour set as the backbone of the album, while adding in a few newer songs that Nikola, John Clelland (drums) and Steve Williams (keyboards) had to learn.

A lot of bands put a new song in to the set. Were you tempted to do that?

I think we'd decided because of us recording the album all in one night, that everyone had to know the material, so sticking in a new song could have thrown us and we didn't want that. We've started writing for a new album but I would have only put a new song into the set if we were close to releasing that album. As we weren't we just wanted to play our songs as best we could and hopefully capture Eden's Curse in its best light.

With the album being recorded in front of a partisan crowd in Glasgow, did you feel more pressure than say if it had been recorded in London or in Europe?

Funnily enough it was exactly the opposite. Glasgow has always been a fantastic place for us to come to and it's the one place we can guarantee that a crowd will turn up to see us and even promoters on our tours have said to us that Glasgow always sells for us. So we were really up for it, and so happy when we found out that we'd sold The Grand in Glasgow out on a Monday night. We didn't even discuss it as a band, we just said when are we going to do it because we all knew that it was going to be in Glasgow. So the pressure actually was off us because we knew they were going to turn up and on that night boy did they deliver for us, the crowd were just amazing. The best thing for us was that because of that crowd and their reaction we forgot very quickly that we were recording the show and just played from our hearts. There was no stopping and starting, just the band playing live from start to finish and we looked at each other when we left the stage and said God, we were recording that weren't we! So thank you Glasgow, you were fantastic.

Nikola Mijic (vocalist) seems to have really nailed it on this album.

He really does. Since his first show with us at Firefest he's been amazing. I was actually talking about this with someone last night and I mentioned that because we'd got it so wrong with the last guy, Marco, who just didn't fit in, we didn't want it to happen again. So we took a long time to find a new singer. With Nikola we really did our research, we watched videos of him on YouTube and we sent feelers out to people we knew and asked them what kind of person he was, what his character was like and we got reports back saying what a professional and nice guy he was to work with and only then did we offer him the job. He's had a lot of experience and the only thing I was worried about was could he interact with the crowds we get, how good was his English…well it's fantastic, he actually learnt to speak it by watching MTV. When he came over here at first he was quite nervous but not about the singing. He was worried about having to introduce the songs in English, which is his third language but his baptism of fire was in front of the Firefest crowd and he did a great job. He's a great front man, and he has a way of interacting with the audience that is something to see.

Who handled production on the album and who came up with the album cover which is stunning?

Thanks Ian, I produced it. I get the glamorous title of producer but Dennis Ward mixed it. I do the donkey work of choosing how the set list goes or if a bit of crowd noise needs to be taken out here or there or whether the guitars need to be louder but in terms of how the whole thing sounds, it's all Dennis. You can have the best production in the world, the best producer but without a good mix it falls by the wayside and Dennis has mixed some of my all-time favourite albums. Again, I came up with the cover idea but of course Thomas Ewerhard, who like Dennis is an un-official member of the band, did the art work. The Egyptian theme works with the album's title perfectly as it's either 'Live or Live' (hard I/soft I) With The Curse'. I have to say though that part of the cover idea is down to AFM who said to us, please don't do a boring cover with a live shot of the band, we don't want that, so thinking cap on, I came up with this Egypt idea.

Away from the new Live album, when will we hear a new EC studio album?

We've actually started on it. We're sharing our ideas for songs and saying to each other, do you like this or that? We've also laid down a couple of rough demos for a couple of songs. What we try to do is come up with about twenty song ideas, then work on them adding guitars and bass to try to give them an EC vibe. After that it's a process of whittling them down to the ten or twelve that will be on the album. I think once we get the tour we're doing with Freedom Call out of the way, we can then concentrate fully on the new album and get it ready for recording, which will hopefully take place late Summer early Autumn, with a provisional Spring 2016 release date. And I can tell you the ideas we have come up with are very exciting.

TALON

With the release of their debut album on Now & Then/Frontiers back in 2002, Talon have continued to use their proverbial claws to carve out a niche for themselves in the Melodic Rock community. After multiple lineup changes, Talon find themselves squarely in the driver's seat with 'Fourplay,' their fourth album of all original material. Not only does this represent Talon's best work to date, it features the return of vocalist Michael O'Mara who sang on their self-titled album. Brent Rusche asked Michael all about the new record.

Being that it is the band's fifth album overall, was naming this release 'Fourplay' simply coincidental or is it the fact that it is really the fourth Talon proper album?

The 'Fire In Your Soul' CD was a reissue of material from Talon - that was during my hiatus - so 'Fourplay' is the fourth album from the band that features all new songs. Being that I'm back in the fold, we had originally thought about naming the album, "Reunion" but liked the play-on-words with the 'Fourplay' title, so we ran with that.

Is songwriting for Talon a collective endeavour or are there one or two primary members who pen a majority of the songs?

Kory Voxen (guitar) and John Parker (drums) will spend time together to come up with a piece of music. The piece might be an entire song or it might be a bit that's only thirty seconds long. After a session together they send the music passages to me. I download the music onto my iPod, get in my car, turn on the music and start driving. Most of the song melodies that you hear on 'Fourplay' were created in one night. I did something new for this album and started with a list of possible song titles. As I listened to the music, I'd instantly decide which song went with which title. Then I would scat a verse and chorus melody into my mobile phone recorder because I've discovered over the years that your first idea may very well be your best. I download all the song ideas to my home computer and start dissecting each one. Sometimes the original verse idea will become the chorus or vice versa. Other times I'll rearrange the song so they complement a particular melody I composed.

Once the music is in order, I'll begin to write lyrics, usually working on one song at a time. The music will cycle endlessly in my head and sometimes the words present themselves from seemingly out of nowhere. I wrote the lyrics to 'Holly Would' while walking down Sunset Blvd in Hollywood, CA. The lyrics to 'Sin City Sister' came to me while I was waiting in line for a ride on a roller coaster. However, there are songs like 'There Ain't Nothin' In The World Like A Rockin' Band' where I didn't have anything written but already knew what I wanted to say. Therefore, I simply pressed the record button and started singing words. For that track, what you hear is basically what I sang on the first demo – too bad they're not all that easy!

The track 'Evil' reminds me of Eclipse. What bands have been an influence to Talon?

I wasn't familiar with Eclipse but recently gave their music a listen and I must say that I'm very impressed. Comparing Talon with them is a very nice compliment, so thank you. I think most of the band was heavily influenced by Hard Rock bands from the 80s. As for me, I'm a huge fan of the Rock bands from the 70s. So many iconic, Hard Rock bands carved out a place in Rock And Roll history throughout the 70s. For this album we looked beyond any influences and tried to make a consistent and solid Melodic Rock album. We didn't want to get caught up in the idea of what this album *should* sound like. Instead, we concentrated on what this album *could* sound like. In doing so, we were able to open our minds and take risks.

Did the recording sessions occur in a live setting, or did everyone contribute their parts separately via file sharing?

Due to my schedule of travelling and performing, I was the only one in the Talon band that was unable to record in (producer) Ty Sims' studio. Thankfully, I have a home studio and that's where I recorded all the vocals. Guest guitarists Tim Pierce and Pete Fry (FarCry) recorded their parts at their respective studios as well.

'Fourplay' blends elements of AOR ('Raise 'Em High') and quintessential Melodic Rock ('Holly Would') with wonderful precision. Which performances on the new album are you most happy with?

That's difficult because I like them all! The recording for all the songs stayed very close to the demos, which makes me very happy. Even the songs that were written prior to this record, 'Evil,' 'Hole In My Head' and 'I Don't Wanna Cry', finally found a home. That said, I think the tracks, considering the final result, I am most impressed with are 'Sin City Sister,' 'Holly Would,' 'Set Me Free,' 'Tonight,' 'It's A Fine Line Between Love and Lust,' 'Love Is Like A Drug To Me,' and 'There Ain't Nothin' In The World Like A Rockin' Band.' Ty and the rest of the band really brought those ones to life.

Did you perform all the vocals and harmonies yourself?

Yes, I did all the vocals. I think the liner credits for the CD should read: Michael O'Mara - Lead Vocals, Background Vocals, Harmony Vocals, Screaming Vocals, Haunting Vocals, Tender Vocals, High Backing Vocals, Really High Backing Vocals, Raw Vocals, Weird Vocals, Slightly Out-Of-Tune Vocals, and symphonic tambourine [laughs].

Being that the band's hometown is stated as being based in the legendary Hard/Melodic Rock capital of Los Angeles, what is the state of the scene out there right now?

I travel quite a bit and what I see is the same underlying theme everywhere. If a band, any type of band, writes good songs then people will support them. Just how many people will support them is the question. I recently watched the 2015 Grammy Awards show and other than a handful of performers, it was pretty abysmal. Music has gone from rebellious to obedient. I scroll down the Billboard Top 100 and all I can say is, what happened? 50% of the artists don't even use real instruments! It seems like you need to either be young and sassy or say the "F" word to be relevant these days. However, don't ever feel that you can't make a change... because you can. Do you want to see more Rock bands? Then make it happen. If you create the demand then it's only logical that we will have to fill the demand. Support bands, support music, support Rock And Roll!

Nightwish

When talking about Symphonic Metal, it is likely that for most people one name will spring to mind first, that of Nightwish. They have released seven previous albums with each one pushing the boundaries of this already expansive genre. Now the Finnish six-piece is back with 'Endless Forms Most Beautiful' – based around the evolution of life – and Dave Scott sat down with Tuomas Holopainen to chat about the huge concept behind this new release.

Since 'Imaginaerum' there have been a few personnel changes. Firstly Jukka Nevalainen has had to take a break due to health problems and has been replaced (for now) by Kai Hahto (Wintersun). Are you happy to discuss what caused this and how difficult a decision it was for all involved?

Well the decision originally came from Nevalainen; he has been suffering from severe insomnia for the past ten years. It started on the 'Once' tour in 2004/5 and he has been coping with it but during the 'Imaginaerum' tour he actually sent us an email telling us that this problem was getting really bad; but he got some help and seemed to be doing better. Sadly, when we started rehearsing for this new album, after just one week, we realised something was wrong. I think it was like two weeks that he didn't sleep at all. He was a walking zombie; he would come to the rehearsal room, play over the songs and afterwards he couldn't remember anything. It was really terrible, we felt awful for him and we really tried everything that was possible. But at this point he took the decision and told us that he was really sorry, he couldn't do it anymore and he had to get out. So we just had to make the decision to call Hahto; he was an old acquaintance of ours and a very good friend of Nevalainen's and we were lucky he had the time and motivation to come and substitute for Nevalainen for this album.

Do you have any idea if, and possibly when, he will return?

That is still totally up in the air at the moment and I honestly don't know. Everybody in the band is truly hoping that he will and that's why it says in the new album – "drums by Jukka Nevalainen, drums on this album were performed by Kai Hahto". He is still a very important member of the band.

You also increased to a six-piece with Troy Donockley joining full time. What prompted you to take that decision; was it a logical one what with he has contributed to your sound since 2007?

That is it exactly. Since that time, he was very much a band member already and he was with us for the whole of the 'Imaginaerum' tour so it felt silly not to make him a permanent member. He is an essential part of the band's chemistry as well; he always fills up the room with light when he enters because he is always happy. He is a multi-instrumentalist, he can play almost anything and he is also a great singer so he brings a lot to the band.

The biggest change was obviously at vocalist with Floor Jansen also joining the band permanently. Did the fact that she toured with you for the 'Imaginaerum' tour make that decision an easy one?

It really did. For big decisions like this, the band is a democracy. Sometimes, I actually feel a little bit bothered that so many people see this as *my* band; they think that I do all the decisions and I am like this dictator, which is really not the case. I am the founder of the band and I do most of the songs, but this is still very much a band and a democracy in many decisions. When Jansen entered the band she pretty much saved us but we didn't make any long term decision; we just opted to see in a few months how we felt, how Jansen felt and to make decisions later. In the summer of 2013, we dared to pop the big question as to whether she wanted to join the band. Immediately she gave us a big yes with a big hug.

Of course, we are really here to discuss your new album 'Endless Forms Most Beautiful' which is based around Charles Darwin's 'On The Origin Of Species'. This is one of the most diverse, complicated, and potentially controversial to some, but equally amazing and fascinating topics you could have possibly chosen. Where and when did you find yourself confronted with this idea for the first time?

I think this goes back a long way. I have always wanted to be a biologist since I was a kid...my mother keeps telling me that since I was six my dream was to be a marine biologist and so the little "natural scientist" in me never left. I even studied biology at a university for six months before Nightwish kicked off so the passion for science and especially biology has always been there. Then at some point a few years ago, I went back to Darwin and I found the works of Richard Dawkins and Carl Saga, these popular scientists; I really got into them and found them incredibly inspirational. As an artist, you always create art out of the things you are inspired by so it was time to do an album influenced by evolution, biology and the magic of reality.

As a writer, how did you manage to combine the passion and emotion of music with science, which is often without emotion and based more in fact and logic?

Well it was really important, always, that we took the poetic approach because we are not scientists and we are not trying to pretend that we are. We were just trying to bring out the poetry and the music of science through this album. There are only so many lyrics that you can put into one song, so you need to take this kind of approach. For example, take the last song on the album, 'The Greatest Show On Earth', you could do five albums around that topic or you could do one seventy minute song, but you have to do a something that is approachable. So it was making little compromises here and there and just trying to find the perfect way to tell the story.

Concept wise, you also had actual involvement from renowned, famous evolutionary biologist and author R. Dawkins. How did you go about approaching him and how easy was it to get him involved in such a way?

Originally we thought that this was going to be a long shot but lets give it a try because so much of the album's songs are inspired by evolution and his books – 'The Ancestor's Tale' and 'The Selfish Gene' for example. We found it a really intriguing idea if there was the possibility of getting him on the album to do some narration. So I wrote him a hand written letter about fourteen months ago and to my surprise about two weeks later I received an email from him thanking me for the letter and that he had never heard of Nightwish before, but that he had gone onto the internet and had a listen to some of our stuff and that he had enjoyed it immensely. He also stated he was looking forward to the collaboration; I think I pretty much fainted at that particular moment but when I woke up I called all the other band members to tell them that Dawkins would be on the album!

Did he come to you to record the passages or did he do it his end and send them?

We booked a studio in Oxford and it's a familiar one to him because that is where he has recorded all his audio books. So we actually went there, met him and spent an hour and half with him recording all the stuff and that was it. He was such a nice guy and a real gentleman. What really impressed me was the fact that he had put a lot of effort into the spoken parts; it's not like he came to the studio and just spoke them through. He had made his own markings and emphasis. He took it really seriously and I was very flattered by that indeed.

Creationist groups are particularly passionate about their personal beliefs; have you had any reaction regarding the

subject matter that you have chosen?

Not personally, not yet...but I have seen some comments on Facebook, on discussion boards (even in some Finnish magazines) saying that "Mr Holopainen is playing with the forces of darkness" and "that he is on his way to hell because he has Dawkins on the album"; that sort of stuff but nothing on a directly personal level.

Could you give us your thoughts on the lyrical ideas behind a couple of the tracks?

One thing I always say I don't want to go into too much depth on is the lyrics and concepts of the songs. This is because you should all have the pleasure of finding that out for yourselves. That is also the beauty of music, art and poetry, that there is not just one way of interpreting things, there are multiple layers. But I will give one example, the last song ('... Earth') is obviously about evolution on Planet Earth. The first chapter of that is called 'Four Point Six' which refers to the age of Earth; it is four point six billion years old. The whole song then goes through the evolution of life on this planet from the origins till the distant future. The last chapter of this song is called 'Sea-Worn Driftwood' and it is just like a thought play of what the world will look and sound like in another fifty million years.

'...Earth' is a monumental twenty-four minutes long and a track that you have described as "the best Nightwish song of all time". How do you go about creating something of such epic proportions?

First of all you have to have the idea, the huge inspiration or a story that you want to do the song about; the theme doesn't really get any bigger than this, the development of life on Earth. I was so thrilled when I got the idea that to write a song which goes through the whole process of evolution on this plant; to do it in chronological order so that we start with the lifeless planet - the formation of earth - then the bacteria, the fish, mammals, apes and then mankind and then lastly the distant future. I have never been so excited in my life about doing a song because it was such an inspiring theme.

When it came to recording, you all got together and stayed at the Rosko campsite. Can you give an insight into those sessions?

What a way to record and rehearse an album! It is a beautiful campsite by a lake in the middle of nowhere. It's a big one so every band member had their own cabin and we also had a lovely kitchen, sauna and all that. What we were after was the ultimate immersion, so it wasn't just another day at work and then you went back to your family or back home. You wake up and you go to sleep in the same place for three months with your band. We practically never left that place and just breathed and lived the album throughout the whole process; just be together and enjoy being a band. It really was the ultimate experience and I think we were able to put a lot of that positive vibe into the album as well.

How did you find the experience of working with the three new members and what difference, if any, did they make to the latest Nightwish sound?

They put a lot of dedication, motivation and enthusiasm into the process. This was the first time ever that we had a chance to rehearse the songs with the whole band all the time. We have never really had this chance before so it brought a lot of laughter and a lot of new ideas into the rehearsal room. I mean Jansen already knew all the songs before she even came into the rehearsal room so she had really done her homework. Donockley, as always, was full of ideas and full of happiness. Hahto only came about a week before the drum recordings. He just did his thing with immense skill and professionalism; he is a wonderful guy as well. All of these people brought a lot to this album and into the songs. Believe me when I say that there was never, ever a moment when there were any egos in the rehearsal room, never any at all and that was the wonderful thing. Everybody was listening to each other's ideas; if somebody had an idea and it didn't work, it was easy to say that and nobody would get hurt. It was wonderful.

Sadly, I saw that not only was the single leaked before its release but that it was a poor quality version. On top of that, the album was also leaked a week before release. What we're your feelings as a result of this happening?

In a way, we were prepared for that because it always happens and it always happened before. It really, really hurts but it has nothing to do with the money side of things. You do an album for almost two years and you set a date and you want to keep the mystery. You want to make the single and album release an event for the fans. You potentially have that in place then suddenly someone leaks a poor quality version, on purpose, onto the internet. It really, really bugs me...I have to be honest about that. It is the modern day and you really can't avoid it.

You will be the first Finnish act to headline a show at Wembley Arena. Are you excited about this and what thoughts have you on this?

Even up to a month ago, I still didn't believe it when somebody said to me there was a chance to play at Wembley; I was like "Yeah right". But it actually happened and the tickets are selling really well; that's what I have heard. It really is a musician's dream come true, I mean the word "Wembley", it has almost like a mystical aura around it. So to be able to finish this year there, it is the ultimate experience. I can't wait!

2013's debut Smash Into Pieces album 'Unbreakable' was an excellent if somewhat disjointed release, reflected by the band's parting with Ninetone records, which seemed to hold the album back. The steady drip feed of material prior to that album coming out did nothing to help the situation, making it seem a little outdated upon release. Fast forward to 2015 and Smash Into Pieces have, in 'The Apocalypse D.J', released an album that stands toe to toe with any released by their American counterparts in recent years. Mike Newdeck caught up with vocalist Chris-Adam Hedman during the recent European tour to find out more about how the band have finally found a formula that works and why they've finally decided to break away from their native Sweden.

Explain the association with Amaranthe and how the song on the album came about.

When we started recording 'My Cocaine' we all felt that something was missing, so we came up with the idea of talking to Elize Ryd. We got along very well on the European tour we did last year together with Amaranthe and we also knew she´s done a lot of different collaborations in the past, so we just asked her right away if she was interested. She loved the song and it turned out really well. Our voices are suited together; there's a light and shade that works.

Your sound is modern with plenty of melody. Do you think there›s an interest in this style of music now?

I don't know actually! We really don´t think so much about stuff like that when we write music - we just write stuff that strikes our minds first! One thing I do know is that I´m so God damn tired of the whole house-music era that's been around for far too long a time now!

How has your music changed from the early years?

Well back in 2007 when I joined the band our sound was a bit different, it sounded more «Creed-ish". Today we sound more like a mixture between Alter Bridge, Nickelback and Soilwork. It´s more mature in a sense. A hard question to answer, I must say!

Your sound incorporates keyboards, which is slightly unusual for a Modern Rock band.

You can blame the keyboards on Per! We have so many influences in the band, it´s everything from Pantera, Metallica and Meshuggah to Toto and E-type! Work that one out.

You›re described as having worldwide aspirations. What exactly does that mean?

We have always been that band that has no limits - we aim for world domination and that´s how everything´s gonna end. Everything that stands in-between us and our goal we Smash Into Pieces! You can rest when you´re dead!

The new album is getting a U.S. release, so why now? Will it be under license? The debut wasn›t released there.

That´s because our label has realised that Smash Into Pieces will have a bigger chance to reach the top overseas. Everything has turned out great here in Scandinavia and Japan, so why not aim for the US also? We´re so excited to be launched in the US.

The new album feels like a step up from the debut. What do you put this down to?

I think that is because we have been touring so much since 'Unbreakable' and we have learned a lot of stuff from the road that works and what doesn't. We´re tired of hearing people saying to us after our live shows that we sound much heavier and better live. Now they got it on CD as well. No more excuses...

How does the songwriting process work?

Usually Banjo and Per are writing the music by themselves at home or on the road. When they have come up with a new idea, they always sends it to the band's e-mail and ask «Is this good or bad?» Basically we go from there with everyone adding their parts and emailing back and forth.

The production on the new album is superb, as good as anything that I›ve heard. Who produced it?

We're really proud of it. Brian Sperber from New York, who also worked with Alter Bridge, Red, 3 Doors Down and Ozzy Osbourne, is the mastermind of the mix and Tony Lindgren, more commonly associated with Soilwork, Kreator and Opeth, mastered it at Fascination Street Studios in our hometown of Örebro. They've got the experience to make a really great Rock record with a sharp sound.

How did you choose the singles?

We as a band choose 'Disaster Highway' as the first single to be released because we wanted to come out hard and strong. It´s a good party song as well and Gain/Sony Music chose 'Checkmate' because we have never released a ballad before as a single, so it was time we added that one. It's commercial and should do well on radio although both songs have a good edge with the guitar right up front.

There›s a small UK tour coming up. Why now?

When we did the European tour with Amaranthe a year ago we noticed that there was a lot of Smash Into Pieces fans in the audience. So we decided that we had to come back, and fast. Here we are one year later, on our first headline UK tour trying to capitalise on our popularity and do something for our fans.

You count Alter Bridge as a major influence but can that work against you?

I don´t think so. The only thing that sounds like Alter Bridge is my voice because I'm heavily influenced by him. When I began my singing career I hated my own voice actually, but in 2007 I heard Myles Kennedy for the first time and I realised that we have similar vocal ranges and techniques, so I thought Hell, if he can do it, I can too. Today I think we have found our own thing and I think people will hear that.

What›s the scene like in Sweden for Rock music? Is it easy to break away from your homeland?

Swedes are very hard to convince because everyone is listening to fucking house music - sad but true! But we have managed to convince many of them to listen to Smash Into Pieces instead so there´s still hope, I guess. We do pretty well there but it's a small market and we need to branch out

Would you consider leaving to live in the US, say like Prime Sth etc?

Of course, that´s our biggest dream and we would move tomorrow if we had the chance. Many bands have done it and we won't be the first. Many bands have moved to Los Angeles from other countries, not just Sweden, and you have to do that if you want to progress and move up. It's worked for some and not for others but you've got to take a chance to find out.

What do you think the future holds for Rock music in general?

I´m not so worried about the future for Rock music. It´s an intelligent music genre and there's always going to be smart people born to this world that can change things up, keep it interesting and progress it so that it doesn't become boring. It will continue to evolve.

SERPENTINE

In spite of acclaimed albums under their belt and many successful concert dates, the UK outfit Serpentine have had their share of bad luck with personal shifts being frequent, to say the least. With new members on board, the revamped band have just released their third album, 'Circle Of Knives', which keyboardist Gareth David Noon discusses in detail with Alexandra Mrozowska.

What is 'Circle Of Knives' for you – a step forward or perhaps just a solid album that's up to Serpentine's standards?

It's a big step forward and a big evolution for us. Our last album came out in late 2011 so you can see that we've spent the time trying to get this album right. We could've released something a year or eighteen months ago, but that would have been short changing ourselves and even worse short changing the fans. We wanted people to listen to this album and see that as a band we are growing and trying to do something different than just making a "solid" album. One review of 'Circle of Knives' said that the album is still Serpentine, just with everything turned up to eleven, and I think that really describes it well.

Any favourite songs on the album? And what about the title and cover artwork?

Well I had a hand in writing all of them, so it really is hard to choose favourites. I do really like 'Season of the Witch', 'Where Does Your Heart Beat Now', 'Bleed' and 'Forever'. In some cases though that's not necessarily because I think they are "better" than others… sometimes a song just has a real meaning behind it to the individual person. Or, in the case of 'Season…' it was the last song we wrote for the album and was just incredible fun to put together. The album took a few years to put together fully, so as you can imagine we had a few album titles in mind over that time, but 'Circle of Knives' just seemed to fit really well in the end. I think it sounds a little darker than what we've done previously and that kind of gives you a flavour of the direction of the album in places. The artwork was designed by Richard Mace and I give him full credit because he has really given us an incredible piece of work. There is something on there that represents all the songs on the album. The vulture from 'Forever', the spikes coming out of the logo representing the knives etc. He's a superb talent.

This year's HRH AOR festival in North Wales was a trial by fire for the revamped line-up… How do you think the recent line-up changes influenced 'Circle Of Knives'?

Well, in terms of the songwriting it didn't really affect anything because Chris, Gary and I were knee-deep in the writing sessions by the time Adam and Owen joined Serpentine. Adam is an incredibly versatile singer though so when it came to recording the album it probably allowed us a few more options in terms of what we could try out. As for HRH AOR, we got some great feedback, which is nice because it can always be difficult playing an hour-long set without a soundcheck etc, which is pretty normal at festivals, but it is a little nerve-wracking when you're playing six new songs! (laughs)

How do the new members find themselves with the older repertoire?

The new lads have settled in great and we have re-recorded a couple of the older numbers as bonus tracks for various territories and formats, so I guess you guys can be the judge and jury on that one! It was important to us that whoever came in as our frontman could do the old material as confidently as the new stuff. It's part of our history and there are some songs we are always going to bring out for the live show!

'Circle Of Knives' was co-written by Gary Hughes and recorded in his studio in Blackpool. How did you hook up with Gary?

It was just the case of "right place, right time". The music that Chris and I had started writing for the album was a mix of the more AOR stuff and some heavier, perhaps more cinematic tracks, and when we did the tour with Ten it just became obvious to us that working with Gary would bring out the best of what we already had. We approached him a couple of months later, had a meeting with him at our manager's house, and it was full steam ahead from there.

How different was a collaboration with Gary from your usual songwriting process?

Oh, it was totally different. In the past Chris and I would write the music, give it to Tony and he would pick the songs he liked, ditch the ones he didn't and we would do that until we had an albums worth of songs. Gary had a far greater influence in terms of the arrangements of the songs, and in some cases we totally re-wrote passages if he or we felt that some things weren't working in the context of the rest of the song. It was a much more "hands on" approach, and it was a blast working with him.

I believe there's a new video in the pipeline?

The first video we have done for the record, and we hope to do a couple, is for 'Season of the Witch'. We shot it the weekend after our performance at HRH AOR and I'm really looking forward to seeing the final cut! It was directed by Callum Andrew Johnston who has just finished up with a movie called 'The Forbidden Note', which Serpentine appears on the soundtrack for. We had such an amazing team working on the shoot including guys who have worked on movies like 'War Of The Worlds', 'Batman', 'Clash of the Titans'… stuff like that. It was a real honour to work alongside them and I hope they had as much fun as we did!

What are your current plans?

We're booking tour dates as I speak, so we'll be announcing our plans soon. We're talking to a couple of bands that we hope to play some shows with that I think would make for some very cool nights up and down the UK! As far as festivals go we have Krushfest in the diary so far, for October in Great Yarmouth. They had some awesome bands on like Black Star Riders and so on last year so I am really excited to see the full lineup for this year!

whitesnake

David Coverdale in conversation with Dave Scott who finds the Whitesnake front man in a "Purple Patch". Photo's by Ash Newell.

Eyebrows were raised when Whitesnake announced the departure of guitarist Doug Aldrich, the person band leader David Coverdale had co-written the group's last two albums with. People were even more surprised when the new Whitesnake album was announced: 'The Purple Album' sees the band revisiting material from Deep Purple, whom Coverdale previously sang with. Dave Scott discovered that David was recovering from the strain of an interview with another publication, along with comments from all the naysayers of whom he unapologetically suggested "should go back to their mother's bedrooms, steal the Wi-Fi and start practising". Before discussing the reasons behind the new album, Coverdale spoke about some personnel matters and the reconnecting with a legendary guitarist by the name of Ritchie Blackmore…

I'd like to ask first of all about what I imagine was the unexpected departure of guitarist Doug Aldrich.

Relationships run their course; there's nobody more in my career I cherish and love than Aldrich and the work we did together. I fucking love 'Good To Be Bad', I fucking love 'Forevermore'. Both albums I would have been very happy to have left as my last studio opus. I was that taken with the songs that we created together. But times change, you know. He was on board; it was very interesting while we were touring in 2013, he was the only one − other than my wife − that I shared with that I was communicating with Ritchie Blackmore. He was really encouraging me to do it and I was going "Wow that's weird!" (laughs). But in the circumstance it turned out not to be and we will get to that. Once we started talking ideas, songs and what I wanted to do with them, I was telling Aldrich all this stuff and we started to working on initial arrangements and then he told me he had picked up this gig in Las Vegas. I asked him "When are we going to see each other, you know, to work on this?" You know there were personal things that went on with Aldrich which were nothing to do with us but were directly affecting us. So the circumstances and effect were that I wasn't getting the kind of time with my wing man that I needed and was used to. So that was a situation...really for the rest of it...Aldrich would still be here now but it was his choice and I salute him and I wish him every success. Anybody who gets to work with him is going to have a blast. He is a very gifted guy, but you know Whitesnake history, David... sometimes it's not my choice and most of the time it is! (laughs) It is because relationships, like in life in general, run their course."

Which leads to the arrival of Joel Hoekstra...

Well, the guy is a fucking giant musically; he farts quality music... it's in tune and layered and Symphonic. But the circumstance was that I heard him play back stage and I thought initially it was Brad Gillis and then I saw it was Hoekstra. We only met briefly and to be fair I wasn't looking for anybody at that time, I was quite happy with whom we had. Hoekstra knew Aldrich and he heard through the grapevine that Aldrich was out and he said "Are you cool if I apply for the situation?" You see Hoekstra was in real early but out of respect to Night Ranger, as they had a bunch of shows throughout the summer, we said let's keep it quiet. One thing you must remember, I have never looked at anyone to come in and replace Bernie Marsden, I have never looked at anybody to come in and replace Adrian Vandenberg. These guys work with me because of what they can bring to the party, hopefully it is reciprocated with what they can learn from me. God willing, it's a two way street; some people, we get together and go "Oh my God, our conversations just turned into compositions". That's the perfect scenario. I have tried to do that democratically but some people don't have that. They can be great musicians but not great composers. So, the circumstance was that we brought Hoekstra in; we flew him in from New York, straight off the fucking plane into Reno, straight into the studio and threw a bunch of these songs at him and some of those solos we have used on the album.

> *"Oh my God, how dare I do these songs... I mean I only helped fucking write them…"*
>
> **David Coverdale of Whitesnake**

That really is in at the deep end...

Yeah, totally. I just saw Hoekstra as me, having all this shit thrown at me when I went to the Deep Purple audition and seemingly I must have risen to the occasion as I got the fucking gig! (laughs).You know, it was so interesting throughout this project; I was so reconnecting with vivid memories from over forty years ago and my time with Purple, like writing with Blackmore for example. But none of the negative stuff; that's one reason I am not allowing the haters into my space. All of the stuff has come back to me incredibly positive and this has been a labour of love. One other thing I have read, "oh my God, how dare I do these songs"... I mean I only helped fucking write them… (laughs louder) You know what, if someone provided a cure of for cancer, the internet would provide haters to go "what was wrong with it?" I don't want to waste my time with these people; it must really suck to be some people who are so miserable that they just have to pick out somebody... not necessarily me... you see it every day. Because they have been given this anonymous situation, they lash out at people, I mean what the fuck is that... what kind of life is that? Opinions are fine, these aren't opinions...these are just... vile and disgust; it's *hate*. Who the fuck needs more hate in this world?

You have just mentioned your latest project, 'The Purple Album'; what were the factors that led to you starting to look at re-imagining the Purple material?

It all goes back to 2012 when a representative of Jon Lord's communicated with me and told me about Lord's illness and about his request that after his recovery, would I be there for him to do some kind of Deep Purple collective reunion? Of course, I said "I will be there for you...are you kidding me, fucking totally". I am not a "nostalgia guy" but I started to listen to the stuff that Lord and I did together in Whitesnake and of course Purple. My first thought, in any of these circumstances, is that I am not interested in anything unless it includes Blackmore. He was the one I wrote the songs with and he is an extraordinarily talented man, an unusual character as we can all testify, but an extraordinarily gifted man, without shadow of a doubt. I did some research and asked some of my medical pals about the kind of cancer that Lord had and the chances of recovery were... well you don't even want to think about that.

You must have felt terrible?

It was fucking horrible. It was a really testing time in the Coverdale household with two bereavements; it was like losing a limb with all this all happening at once. Then my wife and I discussed what are we supposed to learn? Life deals you interesting cards; sometimes you have to learn from things, sometimes you have to run with that opportunity and sometimes you have to let something go... my wife and I are great believers in that. What came out, for me, from this modest epiphany was that life is way too short and way too precious to hold resentment, anger, or whatever. So I gathered together all of these imaginary olive branches; not just in the music business, but in my private life and started to connect with people, re-communicate with people who I hadn't spoken to in forty years or something. It was just extraordinarily touching to reconnect; some of course didn't give a fuck, which is understandable,

but in the circumstance I also felt I wanted to reach out to Blackmore, with no agenda other than to share the grief of the loss of Lord. For me, these guys were giants, to stand between Blackmore and Lord was a breath-taking education... just breath-taking, in so many ways that are still pertinent and relevant to my life now. But... how to do that... the last time I had seen Blackmore we had gotten into a fight. At least I'd had the pleasure of telling Glenn Hughes personally, and Ian Paice through working with him in Whitesnake and certainly Lord, how much I appreciated the incredible opportunity I was given over forty years ago. Even more so now, when I hear this work and go "Fuck me... we were great". As much as I can hear my naivety on the first album... admittedly I was swinging my genitalia by the time we got to 'Stormbringer', but Blackmore, who was hugely important to that whole process, I didn't have connections with. Now long story short, I find Candice Night's email address on my laptop.

Oh! How come?

Yeah go figure! The only way I think that was possible was because, when both Blackmore's Night and Whitesnake were on Steamhammer/SPV, one of the drivers was a beautiful guy called Sasha and he would drive me around for European tours and when he wasn't driving me, guess who he was driving? He was really good with Mac stuff so whenever my computer was fucked, he was also in there, fixing it. That is the only way I can think of that I ended up with her email address. So I wrote a very, very, very respectful email introducing myself, not taking for granted she would know who I was, and said you know "After the loss of Lord I would like to reach out to Blackmore and make amends". Her first response was "Who is this and how did you get this email address?" (laughs nervously). This just fucking cracked me up, I swear, true enough, I would have very likely responded the same. So I wrote back saying that I fully understood and that it really was me and it could be verified. The next day an email arrives saying "David, I am so sorry and I love your work; the next person you will hear from will be Ritchie". We had this initial love-fest of complimenting, even co-congratulating, each other on our mutual works and careers, which was really nice. Then I could tell him personally, rather than say it in an interview that he might not see, that it was beyond words my being able to express how impressed, upon reflection, how brave and courageous they (Blackmore, Hughes, Paice and Lord) all were in giving an unknown, untried, untested singer from Yorkshire that opportunity.

That must have been such a moment for you...

Oh it was, it was fantastic. There was no agenda other than to share the grief at the loss of Lord and express my sadness and commiserations to Blackmore because they started the thing. Regardless of their up and down encounters through life, there was still a love there... a love and respect, sadly kind of compromised by frustrations at times but personalities do that. We have touched on that already, relationships are relationships. But that was it, but then Blackmore asked would I mind and be willing to talk to his manager. I replied sure, of course; once again with no agenda. Carole Stevens and I had several conversations and one was about would I be willing to work with Blackmore again and one of the first things I asked was under what circumstance, because we talked about Lord's request. It got so far as to discuss who would be on keyboards and I said without hesitation I would recommend approaching Keith Emerson. He is from that time and he and Lord had a respected rivalry and I think the fans would totally accept that aspect. That is how far that was going. At the same time, I pull out all the Deep Purple stuff. I was also pretty excited about the possibility of a Blackmore/Coverdale thing like I did with Jimmy Page on the Coverdale/Page album. We could write some new songs, Blackmore and I wrote really well as you can hear! Who knows, it might not have transcended certain things but I wouldn't have worried about that; we could even do our take on Rainbow songs, on Whitesnake songs and on Deep Purple songs; that would have been an interesting package. But my first primary love and responsibility is Whitesnake; not only to my musicians but to the people around the world who support Whitesnake because it is flourishing. I couldn't afford to do it if it wasn't; it isn't something that is limping along with the wheel hanging off... this is a fucking high end Mercedes. So I'm digging out these tunes and hoping he is up for a contemporary version. But when they presented the idea of the touring aspect, I just couldn't get onboard. I explained I couldn't stop what I was doing for such a short affair.

So they were even talking about touring and that was the main problem in the end?

It was a difficult one, we had been talking for a while... this was over a long period of time and all discrete; I was sharing it with

my wife and Aldrich and they were the only ones who knew about it. It wasn't hard to be honest because as I said to you, there was no agenda going in so there was no "Oh fuck, I didn't get that DP reunion". It was nothing to do with that; I was completely thrilled that we had reconnected and I am there for him; I have said that to Stevens. It sounds like Blackmore, to me, is going to do some electric work, which would be welcomed by millions. I have said, have him send me some riffs and I will write some songs round them, that's what I do.

So we can take from those words you are happy to work with Blackmore on another project in the future aside from any Purple reunion aspect?

I have offered my services to do that. They asked me and I have said abso-fucking-lutely, but Whitesnake is my primary scenario. Literally, when I withdrew, I was still on the 2013 tour and I said it with great respect. I have offered to totally work with him; but in answer to your question, absolutely... no hesitation.

Having now had chance to reflect whilst doing 'The Purple Album', how do you now look back on these tracks and maybe that period of your life?

It is most important to know that this is in no way shape or form competing; I don't do comparisons. I decided not to ask Blackmore or Hughes to take part so the distraction wouldn't be there. It is kind of there anyway because people are such big fans of the guys and do ask why didn't I use so and so. The answer to that is because the focus would have been on them as opposed to my guys and my guys have done a fucking stellar job. Nobody is trying to play like Paice, nobody is trying to play like Hughes. The high notes and stuff will sound like Hughes because they are high fucking notes. We've discovered an amazing vocal blend and I am thrilled with what we have brought to it. Once we started working on the songs, I stopped listening to the originals so I wasn't going "We should do an accent there" or that sort of thing; the way we did on the original. To me, the testament to how great it was with DP, significantly better than my memory so the reconnect for me is glorious, but the circumstance is...that we were really fucking good! (laughs) Blackmore and I did most of the writing but everyone brought that Deep Purple identity to the scenario; without Lord it wouldn't have sounded the same, without Hughes it wouldn't have sounded the same... simple fact. We only rehearsed a short space of time; we only had a short time in the studio. I am gobsmacked at what we achieved in these little windows of creative space that we were allowed by the management in between tours; it's amazing. As for 'The Purple Album' well, it took longer to do than it did to do the other three studio records together! (laughs)

Who played keys on the album? I've not seen anyone credited on the promotional material?

It's a guy who worked for us a while back, on the 'Restless Heart' album, a guy called Derek Hilland. There was never an intention for him to come into the band but we just needed more chops than we had in that area and Hilland came in. He is really busy doing stuff; he is a session player, very gifted and a huge fan of both Lord and Whitesnake. I said to him that it was going to be more focused on the twin-guitar assault of Whitesnake. Lord is irreplaceable in every aspect; as a man, musician, character and personality... he was one of the last of the really great people that I have experienced in my life and still resonates with me. Hilland came in and I said "Ah, fuck it." I didn't want to do two guitar solos in 'You Keep On Moving' so he does a really good solo in there. He also does a fabulous piece in the 'Burn' solo too. You really can't change those around too much because they are etched in people's minds and hearts. That said, we started doing 'Burn' on and off during different tours from 2004 and a lot of people thought that it was a Whitesnake song at the beginning; I heard people saying "What fucking album is that on?" I think some of these songs are going to be new to Whitesnake fans. But it was always disappointing to me that Reb Beach never got a solo because the original 'Burn' is Blackmore then Lord who were predominantly the soloists. So early on I had said to Aldrich that I had this idea for a sequence that should not jump or stand out but should tie in as if it was part of the original song in the first place. We flung about some ideas and worked on some stuff, then when he withdrew from the project I re-worked it some more. When Beach flew in, I played it to him and he said "That's great, but do you mind if I have a fuck around with it?" I replied sure, absolutely and he came back with what we have there and that is Hoekstra's solo and I fucking love it. It sounds like a capsule from that time and I think it works great on there.

What will be your abiding memory from working on these songs and this project?

Phew... it's all encapsulated in the whole thing... it really is. Tommy Aldridge coming and me just going "Just go for it" (laughs)... because that was what Purple was; five young maniacs just going for it and thank God it worked together in a fabulous space. All the elements came together but everyone was playing their own ego-driven part. So when Aldridge came in, that totally exceeded my expectations. He came in with the energy of a fucking twenty year old gifted Punk and that was the beginning. That fired up Michael Devin, too so we have his insane, twangy fucking Chris Squire/John Entwistle thing. The great thing is this really was a band scenario... all I did was pick the fucking tunes... but even then I was "bullied" by them into including 'Stormbringer' because I wasn't going to do that one! (laughs)

Whitesnake's new album "The Purple Album" is released by Frontiers Music SRL on May 18th.
Whitesnake tour the UK in December with Def Leppard and Black Star Riders.
Further info: www.whitesnake.com

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NEW RELEASES

RADIOACTIVE - F4UR
ESM275 - Out 17th April 2015

With more than 30 years as a pro guitarist, songwriter and producer Tommy Denander is ranked as one of the finest guitar players in the world by many today. In 1991 he started his own project called RADIOACTIVE and has so far released 3 great albums that are highly praised by both media and fans.
Produced and written by project leader Denander, this new album is all about quality songs, all true classic rock songs featuring the likes of Jimi Jamison, Bobby Kimball, Fergie Frederiksen, Jeff Paris, Steve Walsh, Dan Reed, Robin Beck, James Christian, David Roberts, Jean Beauvoir and more. Radioactive 4 is chock full of fresh ideas and great songs that are bursting to the seams with melody, this is one album worth waiting for..Highlights of 2015!!

ROB MORATTI - TRIBUTE TO JOURNEY
ESM274 - Out 20th March 2015

Limited Edition of 1000 copies only, all numbered!!

Like many of us I grew up listening to Journey and I was always fascinated and amazed by their melodic songs especially with the gifted tone, range and delivery by the Steve Perry. I've been fortunate enough and I'm grateful to have had a wide career in music.. After all these wonderful Rockin' years I still have the ability to sing the songs that inspired me the most. This is my way of saying thank you to the band Journey that made the music that continues to touch the hearts of so many of us and very special thank you to Mr. Steve Perry for giving me the best memories with each and every melody.

TALON - FOUR PLAY
ESM273 - Out 20th March 2015

Featuring:
Michael O'Mara- Kory Voxen - Jim Kee - Phil Keller - John Parker
Special Guest Musicians: Tim Pierce, Pete Fry

An American band based in California, TALON was born from the ashes of VOXEN – a band that achieved international success with their release "Sacrifice", which included a track that was used in the major motion picture "Outbreak". 2015 and the band have gone back to their roots and Michael O'Mara is back behind the mic stand. To add to the excitement they had the great pleasure to have contributions from some amazing friends and guitarists involved in the release. With amazing tracks such as the emotional "Tonight", the in-your-face "Evil", the dirty groove of "Holly Would", this release is bound to show up on a lot of 10 Bests Lists for 2015!

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ALBUM REVIEWS

FIREWORKS GUIDE TO WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT...

NIGHTWISH
'ENDLESS FORMS MOST BEAUTIFUL'
(Nuclear Blast) **SYMPHONIC METAL**
Reviewed by Carl Buxton

Nightwish fans have been waiting a while for this album. With Anette Olzon's sad departure and Floor Jansen's confirmed recruitment to the vocal ranks, the burning question was what would Holopainen come up with to fit the latter's voice. It was universally agreed, among the cognoscenti, that Jansen was the perfect fit; the perfect amalgam of Tarja Turunen's majestic Operatic and Olzon's lilting soprano. The other question on everyone's lips was how good was she going to be on this record?

Well, the wait is finally over. Finland's greatest ever musical export and one of the world's leading Metal bands has delivered an album so spellbindingly huge in its concept, breadth and magnitude that one wonders where Holopainen can take Nightwish after this?

Played as it should be, very loud and on the type of audio equipment you'd sell your grandmother for, the aural sonics are lodged in the auditory nerve of your inner ear. They don't dissipate until the final sounds of the album begin to float away from your subconscious, after your brain has been stimulated with the kind of sensory overload associated with large intakes of caffeine.

Influenced by the naturalist, geologist and evolutionary theorist Charles Darwin, the ethologist, evolutionary biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins and astronomer, cosmologist, astrophysicist, and astrobiologist Carl Sagan, Holopainen has immersed himself into a subject so grandiose that to have achieved what he has is quite breathtaking. He regards the twenty-four minute, five part epic 'The Greatest Show On Earth' as his finest achievement in song-writing. Having to dispense with the birth of the universe due to time constraints, Holopainen elected to start his focus on the birth of Earth through to mankind and then destruction. Dawkins was persuaded to lend his voice to various spoken parts adding some gravitas to proceedings and with animal sounds to heavy percussion, orchestral to overblown dramatic bombast, choirs and lilting voice song alongside piano, pipes and searing guitar – it has it all.

The album covers subjects as diverse as 'Edema Ruh', a nomadic cultural group of travellers and entertainers, and 'The Eyes Of Sharbat Gula', one of the most famous photographs in history of an Afghan girl refugee that adorned the cover of National Geographic. The album title itself is lifted from a Darwin quotation and album opener 'Shudder Before The Beautiful' (complete with a Dawkins spoken intro) is as fine a bombastic and heavy song with crunching riffs as you could wish for from Nightwish.

With Troy Donockley now a full time member and Kai Hahto occupying the drum stool sadly due to Jukka Nevalainen's insomnia issues, you have a six-piece band carrying Symphonic Metal to hitherto unreached heights. Astoundingly epic!

RADIOACTIVE
'F4UR'
(Escape) **AOR**
Reviewed by Ian Johnson

It's been quite a while since Tommy "AOR is in my blood" Denander graced us with a new Radioactive album, ten years to be precise. They do say however, that good things come to those who wait and this album entitled 'F4ur' is proof of this. It has almost everything any self-respecting fan of AOR could possibly want in an album; that being catchy, hook filled songs, musicianship right out of the top drawer, a powerful yet warm complimentary production and finally a set of guest singers that all lovers of this great genre should want to hear time and time again.

On this release, Denander has used his Brother system to ask many of his old friends to sing for him, with names like Jeff Paris, Robin Beck, Dan Reed, Steve Walsh, David Roberts, Jean Beauvoir, James Christian and Bobby Kimball. From that list, you will already have guessed that what you're going to listen to is probably something a little bit special and you know what... you wouldn't be far off the mark.

Firstly there are three songs that feature two of our late and greatest singers, the legends that are Fergie Frederiksen and Jimi Jamison. The former sings on 'Back To The Game' and 'Just A Man' whilst Jamison appears on 'Summer Rains' and they show just what we've lost and I can't say more than that. Putting those three wonderful songs aside, you'll also find ten other tracks tailored to each of their guest vocalists talents allowing the best to be extracted from each singer's performance.

Paris is outstanding during his two songs, 'Beautiful Lies' and 'Start All Over', and they could so easily have come from 'Wired Up'. These two songs alone should immediately make someone take this man into a studio and make him record a new album just as soon as is possible. Walsh on 'The Piper', with its slightly Progressive guitar, is marvellous and the song itself reminded me of Kansas during their 'Power' era; it's one of the album's stand-out tracks. Then there's Kimball's 'Heart Come Alive', Reed's 'If Only My Memory Could Lie', Beauvoir's 'You'll Find The Fire' and Beck's 'When The Silence Gets Too Loud' to get to grips with and for your delectation.

'With 'F4UR' Denander has crafted an album that makes you remember why you fell in love with AOR in the first place, which for me was being able to listen to amazing songs, played by superb musicians and sung by the best singers you could ever want to hear. A winner... enough said!

WHITESNAKE
'THE PURPLE ALBUM'
(Frontiers) **HARD ROCK**
Reviewed by James Gaden

When Jon Lord passed away, David Coverdale reached out to his former Deep Purple band-mate Ritchie Blackmore in a bid to bury decades of ill feeling. The pair did just that, even discussing working together on re-recording some tunes from their past. Unfortunately terms couldn't be agreed, but it did leave Coverdale with a selection of tracks from his past that he had already started to view with a new slant. And lo, 'The Purple Album' was born!

This is not a regular "covers" album, this is still Whitesnake first and foremost. While 'Burn' and 'Stormbringer' don't differ too greatly from recent live versions and 'The Gypsy' and 'Soldier Of Fortune' are similar to the originals, the album as a whole also sounds very much like Whitesnake material.

'You Fool No One' is a spectacular guitar driven foray, which sees the keyboards on the original give ground to the screeching axe work of Joel Hoekstra and Reb Beach. They don't copy solo parts note for note, this is a chance for them to put their own identity on the material. 'Love Child' is more powerful and brooding and 'Lady Double Dealer' is thunderous.

Other tracks have had a complete make-over. 'Sail Away' is much more acoustic, allowing Coverdale's rich lower register to take the spotlight. 'Might Just Take Your Life' begins with a swampy Delta Blues intro, but special mention must go to 'Holy Man'. A song I've always associated with original vocalist Glenn Hughes (even though Coverdale co-wrote it), Whitesnake have rearranged it completely and Coverdale's delivery is marvellous. The result is utterly superb.

There have been critics of Coverdale vocally in recent times. Sure, he's not what he was, but there are precious few singers in their sixties who are. He sings well on this album, his deeper tones sound majestic. When he's delivering the up-tempo stuff, he still has a snarl and power, he hits some high notes and uses some well placed backing vocals to flesh everything out. Critics will lament the fact that 'You Keep On Moving' is one of the only songs with a noticeable keyboard solo, they will bemoan how the guitarists don't sound like Blackmore, how Tommy Aldridge doesn't have the swing of Ian Paice or how the version of 'Mistreated' doesn't sound like the one on 'Burn'… they may even deplore the absence of Hughes, but they are missing the point.

This is not DP – these are Whitesnake renditions of Purple songs, which will appeal to those who are fans of Whitesnake but not necessarily Purple. I think Coverdale has handled it masterfully and it's another excellent addition to a back catalogue already saturated with quality. It's fresh, energetic and highly recommended.

A LIFE DIVIDED – 'HUMAN' *(AFM)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

2015 will undoubtedly be a banner year for Germany's A Life Divided as they ready themselves to unleash an ambitious concept album entitled 'Human' on to the listening public. With a sound largely paying homage to that of Nu-Metal giants Linkin Park, ALD is by no means a mere clone. Repeated listens reveal elements of Danish Melodic Rockers Pretty Maids, the Emo-fuelled trio of Muse and even Nine Inch Nails.

The concept seems to center around someone who is frustrated by society and relationships and ultimately decides to recede from the world. During their self-imposed exile, the character traverses a dark set of emotions including; confusion ('Right Where I Belong'), denial ('Own Mistake'), sorrow ('Believe'), depression ('Live Forever') and failure ('My Apology'). This introspective journey proves cathartic as the album concludes with a willingness and desire to carry on ('Lay Me Down') and start anew ('Happy End').

Although 'Human' is a pithy set containing thirteen original tracks, it is a well balanced album and affords passages which highlight each musician. A Life Divided has certainly honed their craft with 'Human' and will draw fans from a plethora of genres. Despite the band's history spanning twelve plus years, four albums, massive popularity in Germany and their likeness to multi-platinum artist LP, it is shocking that this band remains mostly unknown elsewhere in the world, such as here in the U.S.A. Heavy, but not overly aggressive, succinct songs, memorable hooks/lyrics and a twinge of Electronica is certain to please a myriad of Hard and Melodic music fans around the globe.

Brent Rusche

ALIEN ANT FARM – 'ALWAYS AND FOREVER' *(Executive/The End)* MODERN/ ALTERNATIVE

Better known for 2001's cover of Michael Jackson's 'Smooth Criminal', which reached the dizzy heights of number three on the U.K. singles chart, California's Alien Ant Farm have been treading the boards since 1994 and incredibly still feature three out of the four original members.

This latest opus, the bands fifth, has been a long time in the making being a product of the fan-funded PledgeMusic initiative; the future of music in the wake of major label demise. It began life in May 2013 and the first single 'Let 'Em Know' – a groove orientated Pop affair – first aired shortly afterwards and fans were drip fed with new songs in the form of an EP and second single 'Homage' – a Springsteen-tinged Pop affair – leading up to the album release in February 2015.

As is the normal for Alien Ant Farm, there's an interesting mix of styles, from the aforementioned singles through to the Funky horn-infused looseness of 'Sidelines' and the pure Pop of 'Little Things (Physical)'. Throughout the album vocalist Dryden Mitchell has never sounded better, he's an underrated front-man if ever there was one. The smaltzy groove of 'Crazy Love' even has something quirky and interesting about it; reminiscent of Bleu in both the vocal and arrangement.

Pop Punk is, in the main, abandoned on 'Always And Forever' and although opener 'Yellow Pages' is the album's hardest Rocking tune, it steers clear of mundane cliché's and sets the stall out for rest of the release which concentrates on groove, substance and accessible songs; it's a formula that works well.

Mike Newdeck

ANTHOLOGY – 'THE PROPHECY' *(Independent)* SYMPHONIC METAL

An independently released debut from Slovakia finds the rather uninspiringly named Anthology deeply mining the classic Female-Fronted Symphonic Power Metal sound to good effect. Front-lady Lubica Gavalsova (or the easier pronounced Raylyn Shayde) possesses a pleasantly accented, non-classically trained voice reminiscent of Sharon Den Adel or Charlotte Wessels, without quite being in the same league (yet). Her approach is far from a surprise and neither is that of her band-mates. Kamelot, Delain and the early speedtastic tendencies of Helloween are all touching points but Anthology do their peers proud and with a solid sound (mixing/mastering from Roland Grapow (Masterplan) makes sure of that), this is one of those self-released albums that shows just how much can be achieved with determination, skill and a small budget.

Majo Gonda and Miro Grman make a fine twin guitar assault which is more about thick riffs and speed of light fret-runs than it is harmonies, while Martin Solarik infuses the axe-attack with stabs of keyboard colour that ensures the full-on assault retains a brooding atmosphere. Add in a solid and, at times, flashy rhythm section (Peter Pleva on drums and Marek Stech on bass) and Anthology have all the weapons to make 'Fate In Your Hands', 'The Prophecy' and 'Rise Up!' rousing calls to arms.

There's nothing starling about Anthology; they don't pretend to bring a new angle to an already saturated market and yet to dismiss them would do their debut a disservice. 'Prophecy' may not make the most startling of predictions, but as a first glance into what the future may hold for Anthology, it does a fine job of showing a young band with a full understanding of the genre within which they operate. That may not sound like the most ringing endorsement but make no mistake, if straight-up, convincing, Symphonic Power Metal is where your heart resides... you'll sure as hell get it here.

Steven Reid

ARCANE – 'KNOWN–LEARNED' *(Sensory)* PROGRESSIVE

'Known–Learned' is the third album from Aussie Progressive Metal band Arcane. It's an ambitious, impressively presented, two disc conceptual work that depicts "fragmented moments in the lives of a father and his daughter, their loss, their love, their journey" and offers us "a bittersweet love song for life".

Clocking in at a touch over two hours, it's a weighty album that both requires and rewards repeated listens. It was made possible by a crowd funding campaign launched in July 2013 and has been mastered by Troy Glessner (Devin Townsend Band). Influences cited include Dream Theater, Tool, Anathema and Riverside, and certainly throughout the sixteen track album, the band endeavours to blend high technicality and thoughtful composition with atmospheric intensity.

There is much here to get your teeth into and much to enjoy, though to this reviewer's ears the Metal elements are generally less incisive than, say DT, while the more melancholic and atmospheric Prog elements are sometimes less compelling than the psycho-dramas of Riverside or Anathema's reflections on life, love and mortality. That said, '...Learned' undoubtedly contains moments of genuine and quite breathtaking beauty, notably disc one's 'Womb (In Memoriam)' and (especially) 'Holding Atropos', and disc two's 'Hunter, Heart and Home' and 'Little Burden'.

The material on disc two ('Learned') – referred to on the album sleeve as "Side B" – is generally quieter and more reflective than the heavier material on disc one ("Side A" – 'Known'), but for my money it's the slower, more mournful tracks which are harder hitting and more powerful. Arcane's trump card is the voice of Jim Grey which, at its best, oozes pain and empathy and is every bit as engaging as Talk Talk's Mark Hollis at his most heartfelt or Marillion's Steve Hogarth at his most vulnerable.

With adequate distribution 'Known–Learned' is sure to find favour beyond the band's Australian fan base and give Arcane an international following. With the promise of a live show that offers "staggering visualisations" and "a vast sensory experience", let's hope it happens.

Michael Anthony

AREA 51 – 'JUDGE THE JOKER' *(Devil's Own)* HEAVY METAL

Well this is a tricky one, because Area 51 are a Japanese project from guitar maestro Yoichiro Ishino, with 'Judge The Joker' being their fourth release following three very well received predecessors. The main problem is that it's all in Japanese, with the album insert giving no clues as to what anything is about, as the lyrics are printed in Japanese as well (although for some reason the song titles and credits are not). So effectively what I am reviewing is an instrumental album, with the vocals just another instrument making pretty noises. Ah well… let's have a bash at it anyway.

The first thing that strikes you about the album is that it is VERY Gothy. Ishino and vocalist Kate Cain strike moody poses with gravestones, whilst the cover features a lovely pile of skulls. It's all a bit Final Fantasy meets Castlevania (one for the gamers) and totally threw me as to what to expect from the music within. What you actually get for your buck is a highly melodic and Classical styled Metal album with some unsurprisingly awesome axe work throughout. It can get a bit moody at times, but Cain has a good, uplifting voice that saves it from being completely miserable. It's all a bit vampire orientated, with titles such as 'The Vampire's Agony', 'The Devil's Own' and 'Valkyrja', and I'm guessing the lyrics are far more Gothic than the music, but it doesn't really matter when you have no idea what they are.

'Judge The Joker' is actually a very good album, filled with masterful riffing and scintillating solos, but also with a good song structure and solid vocals that suit it well. It's very unusual for me to listen to a foreign language album (I don't get sent them) but I have to say that it doesn't matter one iota that this is in Japanese because Area 51 should please all Classical and Gothy Metal fans in equal measure.

Alan Holloway

ARENA – 'THE UNQUIET SKY' *(Verglas)* PROGRESSIVE

It's been almost four years since the last Arena release 'The Seventh Degree Of Separation'. Since then, bassist John Jowitt has again left the fold to be replaced by Kylan Amos whilst this is the second album featuring vocalist Paul Manzi, who for me is at least the equal to

AXEL RUDI PELL & FRIENDS – 'MAGIC MOMENTS: 25th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL SHOW' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* HARD ROCK

For more than a quarter of a century now, blond Aryan axe-hero Axel Rudi Pell has steadfastly driven forward the legacy bequeathed him by Deep Purple and Dio era Rainbow. He's had his fair share of detractors of course, those who consider him at best "irrelevant" and at worst "a pale, third rate imitation", but throughout it all he's stuck to his guns and delivered on the money time and again. His secret has a lot to do with the fact that his band feels like just that (a band, not a bunch of mercenaries for hire), but if you're looking for this generation's answer to the God-like Richie Blackmore circa the late 1970s, you'll find none better.

Beginning his 'solo' career in the late 1980s by calling time on Steeler – not the most creative of bands I'll grant you, although fourth and final album 'Undercover Animal' had its merits – 1989's debut 'Wild Obsession' immediately benchmarked the brand that has consistently delivered year after year ever since.

To mark the 25th anniversary of the birth of his solo career, an extra special show was planned for those attending last year's annual 'Bang Your Head' Festival in Balingen. The best part of a year in the planning, the mammoth three hour set would include a host of "legendary" guests – all of his former Steeler band-mates for starters, one time ARP band members Rob Rock, Jorg Michael and Jeff Scott Soto plus a host of big name stars such as Doogie White, John Lawton, Graham Bonnet, Ronnie Atkins, Vinnie Appice and Tony Carey (amongst many others) – to make it a night that no one would ever forget!

Not surprisingly, those who couldn't attend (most of us then!) are now being given the opportunity to share in the magic with the release of 'Magic Moments'. Billed as Axel Rudi Pell & Friends, this 3CD (or 3DVD/BluRay if you so prefer) box-set captures the energy and excitement of those both on and off stage, and as a consequence, is one of those "oh so rare" events that deserves to be treasured by all for eternity.

Little merit in giving you a rambling blow by blow account of each song or solo – that scrumptious little joy is one for you to discover on your own – suffice to say the first disc kicks off with four tracks from Steeler and finishes with three from the early days, the second is a cornucopia of classic ARP from beginning to end, and the third …well...that really pays tribute to the whole Deep Purple/Rainbow legacy that has been his touchstone from day one. How anyone could argue with a set-list featuring 'Mistreated', 'Black Night', 'Long Live Rock 'N' Roll' and 'Smoke On The Water' alongside originals like 'Eternal Prisoner', 'The Masquerade Ball', 'Long Way To Go', 'Mystica', 'Fool Fool' and 'Undercover Animal' amongst many other is completely and utterly beyond me!

If you're in the least bit partisan to the cause, this release is absolutely essential!

Dave Cockett

Paul Wrightson. It also, rather shockingly, celebrates the bands twentieth anniversary.

'The Unquiet Sky' is, and this shouldn't surprise anyone, a concept album of very dark subject matter, which, and this may surprise you, doesn't include any "epics" as such. The songs are all relatively short, most being between four to six minutes with the longest being just under eight minutes with the album as a whole containing twelve tracks.

It starts in very dramatic style with 'The Demon Strikes' and a brilliantly orchestrated intro from Clive Nolan, which is reminiscent of 'Opera Fanatica' before striding out in all its majesty with John Mitchell making an early appearance on guitar. As is typical with Arena, there's a lot of contrasts with the heavier, more intense tracks and quieter more balladic songs. The first of these is 'How Did It Come To This?' which has a really nice guitar solo from Mitchell and demonstrates the emotion in Manzi's voice. 'Oblivious To The Night' is a weird little track, at just under three minutes, and it's a puzzler to me; it's pleasant but I failed to understand its part in the album. I feel it would work better in the middle of a different song.

The title track and 'Unexpected Dawn' probably fit between the soft and heavy with the former being very melodic, the latter has a very strong Uriah Heep vibe to it while the vocal is very reminiscent of Ronnie James Dio (check out 'Catch The Rainbow' on the debut Rainbow album). The dramatic includes the strangely titled 'The Bishop Of Lufford' (don't bother checking Google, there wasn't one), 'No Chance Encounter' which starts heavy, has Funk guitar in the middle and a big finish, 'What Happened Before,' which is total Prog with key and tempo changes and some nice tinkly piano from Nolan and 'Time Runs Out', a bleak song about dying with Nolan doing a Tony Banks solo and ending as a foot tapper, despite the subject. Final track 'Traveller Beware' is the longest at seven and a half and has another excellent and precise guitar solo from Mitchell.

This is another excellent album that all fans of good music will love and the majority of tracks are instantly accessible, while the others soon settle in with just a couple of listens. It's easy to see why they have made the twenty year mark.

Andy Brailsford

ASYMMETRIC ROAD – 'SINUOUS MINDS' *(Vocation)* PROGRESSIVE

It really pains me when I have to give an album a bad review for no other reason than I (personally) think that just one of its performers lets the side down. Sadly that is the problem with this album from intense Technical Progressive Metal act Asymmetric Road.

The musicians who play the bass, drums, guitars and keyboards are amazing, and they conjure up a brilliant mix of Dream Theater and Zero Hour Technical Metal with their incredible musical dexterity; it complements not just each other but the music they create. Unfortunately, their singer Matthias Nussbaumer just isn't (in my honest opinion) right for this band and the kind of music they play. His vocal delivery is too low and raspy for this kind of Metal and what this band really needs to drive them forward is a Russell Allen or James LaBrie type of singer, one who could help to bring the best out of these songs.

As far as the overall album is concerned, the actual music is excellent with some superb guitar and keyboard interplay from Andre Ricci, Patrik Zumstein and Vincent Porcherot respectively. Bows also should be taken by drummer Sebastien Perrad and bassist Leandro Oliveira whose incredible rhythm play lays down a rock solid base and foundation for each of the ten tracks to build upon. As you listen to the album, you can also hear a band that have a real understanding and passion for playing Progressive Metal, with intricate time changes, clever arrangements and passionate musicianship running unfettered throughout the songs. Sadly as mentioned above, even though they have a lot of ticks in the win column, it's Nussbaumer that stops me liking what this release has to offer which is a real shame because this band has potential.

However in this age of "listen and try before you buy", I urge you to please give Asymmetric Road and 'Sinuous Minds' a try for yourselves because it might just be me and you might actually like the vocals and no band should be written off just because of one opinion.

Ian Johnson

AT THE DAWN – 'LAND IN SIGHT' *(Bakerteam)* POWER METAL

I don't know why, but there is something special when you hear the power of nature through the sounds of a thunderstorm – especially on the opening cut of an album! It is generally a preview of what is to come, a kind of setting the mood moment if you will! And, that is exactly what we get on 'Land In Sight', which is At The Dawn's second effort. Billed as a Power Metal outfit, this band also have Progressive and Symphonic leanings.

'Through A Darkened Sky' is the opening track with those strong sounds of nature previously mentioned and the natural powerful sound that is created by the six Italian musicians that make up this group. Born in 2011, ATD are led by guitarist Michele Viaggi who is accompanied by Stefano De Marco on vocals, rhythm guitarist Michele Vinci, bassist Vittorio Zappone and drummer Mattia Ughi.

As we continue this musical journey with these six majestic musicians, we are in for an aural treat! We will encounter the power and regalness of Symphonic passages hardened by molten Metal! '...Sight' is the real deal; an album that combines razor sharp Rock with the atmospheric intricacies of rhythms on a grand scale. It is at times haunting as shown in 'Siren Call' but it also has powerful melodic undercurrents as found in 'The Deserter'.

The sounds created on this disc are Progressive, laid down by a solid rhythm section that punches through the wall of sound, a sound overseen by one Simone Mularoni who produced as well as mixed and mastered this opus. Mularoni is also one of a select group of musical guests that band-founder Viaggi has graciously invited to be a part of the album. Every jewel in this twelve track release is also layered with the magical mastery of keyboardist Marco Iaffaldano, whom is the sixth member of the group. His interplay with both guitarists creates a deep river of sound that will propel you as you continue this majestic journey.

'...Sight', like its predecessor, will meet critical acclaim and rightfully so as At The Dawn continues with the promise and potential displayed on their debut 'From Dawn To Dusk'. With twelve stopping-off points in all, 'Land In Sight' is a journey well worth taking!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

ATTIK DOOR – 'NEVER IN AGREEMENT' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Attik Door are a Female-Fronted Modern Rock band hailing from Russia, who have been based in San Francisco U.S.A. since 2011. Though the bio states that they play Punk-infused Rock music, I'd describe the sound more like a Metal version of No Doubt. The line-up consists of Alex Shrayber (guitar), Liana Tovmasyan (vocals), Igor Boyko (drums), Rita Grabarova (bass) and Tim Shulepov (guitar), with Shrayber acting as the primary song-writer.

The material on 'Never In Agreement' is mostly downbeat even though the tempo varies enough between songs to give them something of an identity. The melodies take a few spins to sink in and the hooks could be punchier but the song structures and arrangements indicate that Shrayber has a creative streak.

The performances throughout are good and it is nice to hear a few guitar solos to give the songs more of a Rock feel. Tovmasyan's vocals are not bad but they lack a strong dynamic and even though there is little trace of an accent, a lyric sheet would have proved useful at times.

'Bleed' has a Rap-like bridge and some harsh vocals and riffs before the hook kicks in and this is contrasted nicely by 'California', a song that reigns in some of the aggression, giving the subtleties and mood changes a chance to impact. It is somewhat ironic that 'Moody' has the most energy. The up-tempo vibe and bouncy melody has a Pop Music quality that gives it a strong commercial edge yet this is not indicative of the album as a whole. The production values are good for an independent release and I expect Attik Door come across really well in a live setting.

There is certainly a market for this kind of music but they do need some exposure to get a foot in the (Attik) door. 'Never In Agreement' is an encouraging start and though it won't set the world on fire, it will be interesting to see if they can grab a support slot on a major tour sometime in the near future.

Dave Bott

BONFIRE – 'GLORIOUS' *(Borila)* HARD ROCK

Bonfire without Claus Lessmann? Been there, done that and it hardly worked... That's why many were sceptical when they learned about Bonfire's line-up being re-arranged almost from scratch. However, with Hans Ziller and his band-mate Harry Reischmann re-grouping with Ronnie Parkes, Frank Pané and David Reece, their first effort released as Bonfire – 'Glorious' – is mostly doubt-dispersing.

The sound on the album is dense, melodic and guitar-laden with keyboards giving a bit of AOR-ish 1980's tint. It also features excellent vocal performances from Reece, even though some of them bear the distinctive Bangalore Choir stamp all over them rather than Bonfire itself. From the opening '21 Guns Salute (Goes Boom)' and 'Nothin' At All' to 'Free Wind Desperado', there's plenty of fast-paced Rockers with well-crafted choruses. The majestic piece 'Glorious' has an anthem-like quality to it while 'Supernatural Disguise' is heavier, yet mercilessly infectious AOR. Also, a handful of ballads found their way onto the album – mostly finely dramatized, intense pieces such as 'Fallin' Outta Love', 'Shooting Star' and 'Lies'. 'Remember' and 'Put Out The Flames' bring back the vibe of the classic Bonfire albums and so do the 21st century renditions of 'Sweet Obsession' and 'American Nights' – even if the latter two will evoke nostalgia for their originals rather than anything else. 'Glorious' closes with band's fine take on 'With A Little Help From My Friends', which can be classed as either a homage to the late Joe Cocker or a sort of commentary upon the recent happenings in the band's camp.

It's not easy to decide, despite the major line-up changes, whether 'Glorious' picks up where 'Branded' or any other Bonfire album left off because there's no dramatic shift genre-wise and there's hardly a change to Ziller's guitar style that has preserved much of Bonfire's trademark sound. Irrespective, it's more about opening a whole new chapter in the band's history; Reece himself is too characteristic to avoid certain associations and comparisons. That's why a variety of musical flavours can be found on this album – not necessarily all of them Bonfire-esque. But at the end of the day it's not about the "brand" and particular names behind the music as much as it is about the music itself.

It has to be thus declared loud and clear that 'Glorious' is the revamped Bonfire's return to glory – an album of solid song-writing with a thick Melodic Rock sound and fabulously catchy choruses. There's certain chemistry between this line-up that this record reflects. Had the previous line-up remained together, would they have likely arrived with something stilted and uninspiring instead? We can only hypothesise and debate – but with the arrival and quality of 'Glorious', we at least needn't worry any more.

Alexandra Mrozowska

BABYLON A.D. – 'LIVE @ XXV' *(Apocalypse)* HARD ROCK

Now firstly I'll claim to be slightly biased in favour of Babylon A.D. Actually, truth be told, I'm more than biased so reviewing this potentially presents a little conundrum; if it's poor what do I say? Thankfully, as good sense would dictate, it's not and it's indeed a little corker.

For those that have seen BAD recently, particularly at Firefest, 'Live @ XXV' is essentially extremely similar to the set the guys delivered that night. Opening with the cult classic 'Back In Babylon' and veering straight into 'Hammer Swings Down' is a master-stroke. The gritty live mix lends a sense of "real" to proceedings, Jamey Pacheco's drum sound is a little "thin" at times but in essence it is a live album in its real format; not recorded in the studio and no crowd noise added, unlike some others. Crowd favourite 'Sinking In The Sand' makes a welcome appearance and when 'Bang Go The Bells' erupts, quickly followed by 'Maryanne' and the aggressive 'Bad Blood', you realise just how good these guys are.

In an age where many bands are unable to live up to their original legacy, BAD have no such problems. Ron Freschi and Danny De La Rosa are mean players and the rhythm section of Pacheco and Ireland's own Robb Reid on bass are as solid a bottom end as you are liable to hear anywhere. Derek Davis sounds not only note perfect, but every bit as good as he did back in the day, nailing 'Desperate' with consummate ease. The inclusion of 'Kid Goes Wild' (which featured in the 'Robocop' soundtrack) brings proceedings to a close with De La Rosa nailing the solo and the crowd obviously getting hugely into proceedings.

The second of the two encores begins with a cover of UFO's 'Lights Out'; I always wonder why bands with so much original material to hand tend to do this, but credit where its due, it's a rather stonking version. Davis again proves he has the pipes to challenge anything vocally whilst the twin guitar assault absolutely slays all before it.

Add Babylon A.D. to the small list of bands from back in the day that can still do it all

musically and vocally and sound just like they did twenty-five years ago. If you saw them at Firefest then you know what to expect. If you didn't, this is as close to what you missed as you are likely to hear. It's marvellous from start to finish, containing a bucket load of bona fide hits and deserving a place in anyone's collection, especially if you are a fan of REAL live albums. Now if only they could be persuaded to deliver a new studio album.

Kieran Dargan

BACHMAN – 'HEAVY BLUES' *(Linus)* ROCK

Randy Bachman is savvy. He knows what fans want and he provides it. He's been in this "biz" for forty years now and showcased his excellent music through his 'Vinyl Tap' radio show and tour, 'An Evening With Bachman' if you like, and now he has reached into his unreleased trunk of tracks to produce a rather tasty (effectively) solo album which features some high profile guests.

It's a Bluesy album, but not a Blues album. This is Bachman's sound, fuzzy and meaty, but with Kevin Shirley, given kudos by Bachman, simplifying the sound somewhat and really emphasising a Rootsy thump.

This album has an assured quality and each song shows maturity and longevity. 'Ton Of Bricks' (with Scott Holiday) may have a familiar galloping backing but with gorgeous acoustic moments, Cream are certainly referenced in the Joe Bonamassa-partnered 'Bad Child' which has a winsome Psyche vibe and there are several guitar run offs, plus a tasty conglomeration of screaming solos in 'Heavy Blues' (featuring Peter Frampton) and a calming cool 'Wild Texas Ride'.

Sometimes the simple songs tip into torpor, but Bachman ensures enough of his sound is there to deliver to his fans and to make others look twice. Canny, classy, congenial, this is meaty but perhaps not a prime cut.

Steve Swift

BAD TOUCH – 'HALF WAY HOME' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

Hailing from Norfolk, Bad Touch are a five-piece who started life as a "covers band" but then evolved into writing their own material. This, their debut effort, is a bombastic, raw collection of thumping Hard Rock influenced by the likes of Led Zeppelin and Rival Sons.

'Wise Water' sets the bar high and is a wise choice for the album opener and lead single. The pounding backbeat, guitar riffing and wailing vocals all have that pleasing Classic Rock vibe, while 'Waste My Time' chugs along proving that the quality of the first track was no fluke. One thing that is immediately apparent is the album does not sound like it has been polished and touched up – the hum of the amps, feedback and studio chat can all be heard. The band aren't one to do much in the way of fade outs, the songs come to a conclusion naturally and suggests the album was probably recorded "mostly" live.

Aided by the sparkling production, the record has a mass of energy and vibrancy which allows songs like 'Motherload' and the air guitar anthem 'Good On Me (Jeans Song)' to really take off. There are some quieter moments; 'Something Someone' has the Zeppelin-like, dreamy guitar sound nailed down and 'No Excuse' mines a rich Blues vein. For the most part though, this album sets the dial to eleven and is there to Rock, as the powerful closer 'Words I Never Said' proves to great effect.

I do like my Classic Rock and there are plenty of bands who do the "Retro" sound well. You can add Bad Touch to the list.

James Gaden

BAND OF SPICE – 'ECONOMIC DANCERS' *(Scarlet)* HARD ROCK

Christian "Spice" Sjostrand is the singer and song-writer with Swedish Stoners Spiritual Beggars, but don't expect the exact same sound if you pick this one up. They are on their second album now and there is indeed a 1970's vibe shared between Band Of Spice and SB but there's a cleaner Classic Rock sound to the former that even throws in a touch of Glam and Pop Rock. What keeps this in the Hard Rock camp is Spice's vocals; he sings everything like a large wounded bear.

It's an album of variety, different styles and an artist just going where the muse takes him. As a result you have a record that affords repeated listens and you'll pick up new favourites with subsequent spins. There are a number of straightforward Rockers like the title track, the tasty riffing of 'True Will' and 'You Know My Name' that are decent without being life changing.

The first track that makes you truly blink, catching you by surprise, is 'On The Run' which is a dead ringer for late 1970's Bruce Springsteen item and shares not just the sound but the life affirming carpe diem of much of the man from New Jersey's best work. It's followed, after a small keyboard vignette, by another stand out track, the altogether darker, mid-life crisis of 'The Joe', which marries a strong melody to a believable lyric. It vies for best track with 'You Will Call', which starts as a light Pop Rocker before moving up a gear to glorious Classic Rock with lengthy soloing throughout that really lifts this song above the others.

The rest of the album continues to have some interesting ideas with Spice's bark helping give the record a unique identifiable edge. Not everything is top drawer but its best is very good and therefore worth checking out if you're a fan of SB or like re-imagined 1970's Hard Rock.

Duncan Jamieson

BEN BELL – 'PATCHWORK CACOPHONY' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

'Patchwork Cacophony' is the debut album, five years in the making, from the Fusion Orchestra 2 keyboard player Ben Bell. It features a pleasing mix of short and quirky and longer, more ambitious instrumentals alongside an extended nine part, twenty-eight minute "concept suite" ('Dawn Light') that functions as the album's pièce de résistance. It also takes the meaning of a solo album to its logical extreme; it features no other musicians given that Bell is not just a keyboard player but a multi-instrumentalist. One of the reasons it took five years is that the recording was put on hold "several times" while he learned to play new instruments!

Does this occasional novice status hold the album back? Well, not that you'd notice from a non-technical, non-muso perspective, as there's plenty here to interest and delight Progressive Rock fans who like to linger on the genre's lighter side. The emphasis throughout is on "Classic" era Prog sounds with the Hammond Organ and Mellotron featuring alongside Bell indulging his Symphonic influences. '...Cacophony' self-consciously invokes the spirit of early Genesis, Camel (especially) and Yes, while its author, producer and performer attempts to make his own mark. The Hammond sound inevitably invokes memories and echoes of Jon Lord and, indeed, I'm reminded here and there of some of the lighter moments on Lord's more Rock-based solo material where the music sounds joyful and unrestrained without always having a lot of bite.

There are nice touches, motifs and melodies throughout and it all makes for very pleasant listening. The title of the third track ('Dance Of The Fleet-footed Heffalumps') gives you a feel for Bell's sense of playfulness. That said, there is a dramatic end to the sixteen minute opener 'Sketch Of A Day' – initially written as a late night piano improvisation – which is reminiscent of Richard Wileman (Karda Estra) at his most Gothic. Similarly, the aforementioned '...Light', the only track with vocals, also has its more weighty moments. Having started life as a set of ideas for a comedy zombie musical, it morphed into something with more serious intent, the lyrical sentiment occasionally clashing deliciously with the more accessible and brighter music. "Are we looking at the final sunset? Is this the end of our time?" asks Bell on the upbeat and Folky part entitled 'Final Sunset'.

Overall, 'Patchwork Cacophony' might not have quite as much punch as FO2's 'Casting Shadows', about which this reviewer said kind things back in Issue #63, but then it's supposed to be a different kind of album. It's probably rather too nic(h)e to sell in truckloads, but it's an enjoyable album that certainly succeeds in selling the virtues of Ben Bell as a talented and creative artist.

Michael Anthony

CORVUS – 'CHASING MIRACLES' *(Lynchburg)* AOR

I had heard a couple of demos by Birmingham-based AOR-ster's Corvus before and while I was intrigued about hearing their album, I wasn't fully prepared for what I was about to hear. I thought "nice little local band, writing and recording my style of music, it'll be a pleasant enough spin" but instead I was instantly levelled by what a catchy as hell, pure AOR album 'Chasing Miracles' is; this easily shows up some of the genre's big boys and their releases from recent years. Corvus to me come across as the British version of Work Of Art; whilst remaining quintessentially British, they do show off their American and Scandinavian influences.

'...Miracles' is, from start to finish, an instant and enjoyable rollercoaster of catchy as hell songs that get you cranking the volume and dancing along. To be honest, catchy as hell is a massive understatement; this album has had a lot of time and love spent on it in every department and trust me, no hook is left unused and it shows in abundance on every single track!

Another startling thing is the supreme level of musicianship shown throughout the band, for most the names here will be unknown but they sure as shit don't play like nobodies. Guitarist John Clews is probably the best known for his time with Serpentine and the guitar work across the entire album is phenomenal. I'm not one for guitar histrionics but Clews has an uncanny ear for the melodic and slips some awesome fret-work into these songs which only increases their appeal. I'm not one for instrumental's either but I absolutely adore 'Retribution' which actually reminds me of Gerhard Pilcher's instrumentals with Melodica.

Lead singer Ciaran James has a really cool, deep tone and this brings out a great vibe in the flow of the songs. Even in AOR circles, keyboardists seem to remain the unsung heroes of many an amazing song and I have to highlight Nick Jeavon's playing here; he doesn't play fluff or filler, his wonderfully adventurous and varied keyboard licks enhance the feel good factor of all these already "smile-inducing" songs. Lyrically as well, there is some great uplifting and positive messages in there – this album will be getting some serious airplay this summer!

These guys are a real revelation and all pure AOR fans really should prepare themselves for the "Feel Good Record Of The Year". This album is so uplifting you may find yourself floating away as you listen and as you sing along you might just find yourself involuntarily dancing and smiling like a Cheshire cat. I can't wait for these guys to explode onto the scene and hopefully hit the road!

Paul Woodward

BETH HART – 'BETTER THAN HOME' *(Provogue)* BLUES/SOUL

Beth Hart's never hidden her troubled past or continued struggle with addictions and with new album, 'Better Than Home', she presents and confronts more personal aspects of her life. While 'Boom Boom Bang Bang' was a lighter offering, '...Home' brings her back to where she truly excels, putting her heart on her sleeve and opening up the vein of her life experiences. She's delivered a body of work so full of raw emotion that listening to it is a physical experience, but don't for one moment think that this is a dark album. This is about the good things in her life, her gratitude to the people who have seen her through, her parents and her beloved husband. It is about not being perfect, life's daily struggles but most of all about her own strength over adversity.

'Might As Well Smile' and 'Tell 'Em to Hold On' are Bluesy gospels, simple piano and the rich tapestry of her voice. 'Tell Her You Belong To Me' is a deeply personal song to her father, married to a woman who refused to allow Hart anything to do with him; the message is clear and heartfelt - "whatever happens you'll always be my Dad". Bad girl Hart belts out 'Trouble', its sassy and gives you an insight into the powerhouse, ballsy lady that she is. 'Better Than Home' is firmly in the present – "I am not afraid or lonely, I am not chasing the ghost of the past" – it is a retrospective but essentially, it's about being at peace with who she is now.

Her range is extraordinary and never once does the voice falter, she's one of few people who delivers the power and precision live as perfectly as she does recorded. Hart never hides her feelings and 'We're Still Living In the City' acknowledges the ups and downs of her and her husband's hobo life, but that she's "still crazy about you baby, even after all this time". 'The Mood That I'm In' is lighter and fun with a Funky Soul feel to it. Favourite track for me is 'Mechanical Heart', a raw, sincere love song to her other half telling him that although damaged, she will love him the best way she can. 'As Long As I Have A Song' evokes midnight

in a smoky lounge bar just Hart, a piano and THAT voice. Final song is 'Mama, This One's For You', a song of gratitude to the person who stood by her through everything and got her to where she is now, sweet without being cloying.

'Better Than Home' is without doubt what Beth Hart does best; Blues, Gospel and Soul and this could possibly be her finest album to date.

Helen Bradley Owers

BITE THE BULLET – 'WHEELS' *(Target)* ROCK

Equal parts passion and presence, that's a good line. The music almost lives up to it too. The press goes on to say that this mixes British 1970's Rock, Scandinavian Psyche Rock and old Blues (Dan Auerbach's name is thrown in for modern savvy). It almost does, but falls short. It's perfectly acceptable but breaks only a few pots.

'Wheels' has a Temperance Movement Rootsy feel and the simple thick riff and staccato piano of 'Uniform' offers fun but three quarters of the way in, they really start to suck air, limbs moving as if through treacle. The songs are just stomps with Misfits synth augmentation and the closer 'You Will Be Mine' is just atmos and interminable Mark Knopfler guitar; yes, that.

When good they're cute and approaching cool. But is that enough? When listening to New Romantic touches, playing Prince Charming with Ulysses on 'To The Seaside', yes it is. But this enjoyment doesn't happen enough. It peters out like a mid-table Monday night football match, apologising for keeping us so long. There is something here, the 1960's throwback, the fuzzy logic, like Wedge a few months ago; the latter though gave us only what they had whilst the former give us what they think we want and so are left wanting.

Something is good here, there is a definite flicker. It just needs to develop.

Steve Swift

BLACK WHISKEY – 'HEAVY TRAIN *(Rocksector)* HARD ROCK

Black Whiskey, a new name to this reviewer, are a U.K.-based band fronted by ex-Xentrix singer Simon Gordon. Musically it's groove laden, Les Paul driven Hard Rock with a Blues edge leaning more towards the rhythmic pulses of Burning Rain, The Almighty and perhaps a touch of Gun thrown in for good measure, not to mention Gordon's vocal similarity at times to one Kal Swan.

There's ne'er a hint of plagiarism however as these guys have a style all of their own. The opening trio of 'Idol Rich', 'All Seeing Eye' and 'Devil Rides' set the stall out firmly and sets the tone for the album, an old-school Hard Rock record. The video of '...Rides' is available to view on social media if you wish to put faces to the band, which is sometimes a worthwhile exercise. 'Hungry For Bullets' may just take best track on the album by a short head from 'Save My Life', both of which are rather meaty; a special mention for 'The Coming Storm' which finishes a close third.

If I were to be critical of the album it would be with the running order as to these ears the opening trio do not flow as well as other tracks on the album and a little bit more attention to detail in this regard may have improved the overall listening enjoyment of the album – not that there is anything wrong with the first three, simply put, there are far better opening salvos lower down the running order that would take this album out of the solid and into the good bracket.

As debut albums go, 'Heavy Train' isn't bad at all. It certainly does not scream at you to rush out and buy it but it is a solid, if unspectacular, effort that shows plenty of promise and potential. It's just a pity in this day and age that bands rarely get to fulfil either.

Kieran Dargan

BLUES PILLS – 'BLUES PILLS LIVE' *(Nuclear Blast)* ROCK

This album was recorded during the band's headline show at last year's Freak Valley Festival, which was held at Netphen, Germany. Jens Heide put the festival together and even gave the name Blues Pills to the band who were the bill-toppers on this occasion.

If you have attended any shows from the band, then you will know this is an accurate representation sound wise of everything that BP bring to the live arena. 'High Class Woman' has a massive sound live and is the perfect slow-burning opener for the band. Guitarist Dorian Sorriaux completely owns this song, ejecting a mixture of distortion and finesse into his guitar playing.

Influences of Peter Green and Richie Blackmore are very apparent, especially on 'Ain't No Change', whilst 'Bliss' – a song sung in Swedish – still hits the mark no matter what language you speak. The shamanic vocals of Elin Larsson breathe life into the lyrics of 'Dig In' while the rhythm section holds a Psychedelic swing beat that's infectious.

There is little conversation between songs, the music does all the talking, and is demonstrated to its best on the mesmerising 'No Hope Left For Me', with every word ringing true. BP delivers Soulful Rock on 'Devil Man' and we get Blues played from the heart on the accomplished 'Astralplane'.

The album sits very comfortably next to such organic live classics as Grateful Dead's 'Live Dead' or The Doors' 'Absolutely Live'. As a souvenir of the Blues Pills live experience or just an introduction to a truly exceptional band, 'Blues Pills Live' is a true musical seduction experience.

Ray Paul

BUMBLEFOOT – 'LITTLE BROTHER IS WATCHING' *(Independent)* ROCK

In addition to other hobbies, which at present includes development of his trademarked hot sauces (what's with so many musicians flexing their artistic muscle outside their bailiwick into the realm of foodstuffs, anyway?) and guitarist in a relatively low profile band called Guns 'N' Roses, multi-talented guitar extraordinaire Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal has somehow found time to record another solo album under his self-imposed surname Bumblefoot.

In many ways, this album seems like the natural progression from his fourth album, 'Uncool.' The song-writing is tight, hooks are memorable and there is an underlying "lounge act/crooner" vibe that permeates throughout, none better illustrated than on songs like 'Cuterebra' and 'Eternity.'

Like his hot sauce, the flavors on this album are strong and lingering. This album is wonderfully varied, teeming with great songs and musicianship which celebrates all sides of his personality. Album closer 'Never Again' is a song that raises the hair on the back of your neck and will have you chanting "never say, never say, never say never, again" for sure.

His powerful and confident skill as a vocalist compliments his inventive guitar wizardry. What's more, his unwavering passion for melody further magnifies the impressive vocal abilities he possesses. Those new to Bumblefoot will find this a refreshing and rewarding experience yet listeners who are familiar with his discography (and vocal-centric) previous releases will find him tapping the same muse as in times past.

However, with his vocals improving with every album and his ability to seamlessly blend brilliant guitar technique, insightful lyrics and sublime melodies, the result is a diverse and entertaining album. Although the gig in G'N'R might pay the bills, his talents are supremely realized in all of his solo efforts. Furthermore, 'Little Brother Is Watching' is yet another album that proves Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal possesses the talent necessary to remain a solo artist and/or bandleader in his own right.

Brent Rusche

DAN PATLANSKY – 'DEAR SILENCE THIEVES' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

The chances of you having come across the work of Dan Patlansky before are slim, unless you live in South Africa, where he resides and has released six previous records. However, it's 'Dear Silence Thieves', his most recent effort, which looks set to launch him up to the next level.

Things really picked up for Patlansky last year, where he was picked to open for Bruce Springsteen in Johannesburg in front of an audience of around seventy thousand people – a big achievement in its own right, one made even more special when you consider it was Springsteen himself who picked him, with "The Boss" even watching Patlansky's set from the side of the stage. Then, upon the release of 'Dear…', Patlansky's record was voted the number one Blues Rock album by Blues Rock Review in the U.S., topping a list that also featured Rival Sons, Joe Bonamassa, Philip Sayce and The Black Keys, just to name a few.

With things on the up and more and more people asking the "who?" question, Patlansky's record is now getting a U.K. release and several labels are said to be showing interest. It's no wonder, as soon as you hear the opening song 'Backbite', he has your attention. There's a slightly Funky feel to the opening riff, the booming drum sound and Patlansky's vocals remind me of some of the material Stevie Salas has delivered; there's Blues DNA running through it all. The song has been making everyone who has heard it take notice, and 'Pop Collar Jockey' has a similar grip. The echo laden vocals and arpeggio riff are a lethal combination with the drums holding back until the last moment.

The album sounds huge, as it was recorded "mostly" live. 'Fetch Your Spade' has Rock chops in abundance while still keeping the Blues on its sleeve. There are many other choice cuts such as the shuffling 'Taking Chances' and the Funk of 'Feels Like Home' as well as the acoustic driven 'Windmills And The Sea', the trademark Blues licks of 'Only An Ocean' and the delightful closer 'Madison Lane'.

With material of this strength there is little wonder Dan Patlansky is breaking through. This is an impressive and vibrant collection of contemporary Blues Rock, seamless weaving in flavours of Funk. Great stuff!

James Gaden

CAILYN – 'VOYAGER' *(Land Of Oz)* PROGRESSIVE

And now for something, not completely but certainly a bit, different. An album of Classically-influenced Progressive and Symphonic Rock with a collection of pieces inspired by and based on the Voyager space programme. 'Voyager' is the handiwork of Wisconsin-based multi-instrumentalist Cailyn (Lloyd) with the accent on her favoured guitar and arrives as a clear successor to 2012's 'Four Pieces'. Once again, fusing Progressive Rock and Classical arrangements and this time calling on excerpts of music from Holst's 'The Planets' suite to provide a harmonious vision of the worlds visited by the Voyager probes. Holst's work, of course, has been well covered in parts in various Rock quarters and gets a look in here too, a couple of his pieces receiving re-working and interpretations where appropriate.

Adding Neil Holloman (drums), Deryn Cullen (cello), Ian East (sax) and Shelby's vocals to assist in bringing her concept to fruition, much of the emphasis seems initially to be on atmospheric keyboard-based sound – not surprising as much of the music was written at the keyboard. Cailyn did plan for some "word-less" vocals for several tracks, the smooth "aahh's" giving an angelic other-worldly effect most notably on 'Voyager' itself. The title-track also provides an uplifting introduction, varying from spacey ambient moods and celestial choirs to more Rock-styled crescendos while the subsequent 'Io' and 'Europa' continue the exploration; the former combining a Classic Rock four-piece of guitar, bass, keyboards and drums, before the latter delves more into a New Age vibe with some Bluesy inflections courtesy of Cailyn's guitar workout.

'Ariel' and 'Miranda' provide something more standard with Symphonic and Classical influences and arrangements taking a back seat and allowing more of the Rock stylings to come to the fore – synth fanfares, dominant guitar and a race to the finish typify both pieces. Mid-album, there's 'Enceladus' which branches out on a limb in a free-form moment of madness – free of time and key signature it provides a short interval which isn't as challenging as it sounds.

Compositions such as 'Triton' and 'Pale Blue Dot' allow Cailyn's guitar to shine through, something that after a few playbacks starts to take a hold and make the listener aware of the strong influence and role of the guitar throughout the record.

Without destroying any walls to provide something truly ground breaking, 'Voyager' is a welcoming piece of alternative escapism from the usual round of tried and trusted Classic Rock.

Mike Ainscoe

CARBONINE – REBIRTH' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Los Angeles has thrown up (sometimes literally) some odd music, yet newcomers Carbonine have come out of the traps running with their already well respected debut. The band themselves drop names like Deep Purple, Black Sabbath and Pantera (and the mere mention of this act shouldn't have readers running for the hills) as sound references,

but personally I think they have a much more unique, modern sound than any of those would suggest. I certainly wouldn't suggest them to the likes of an avid Pantera or Sabbath fans.

Carbonine are definitely heavy, at times blisteringly so, but they never come across like a Heavy Metal band. 'Winter Night', for example, features the sort of shredding in the middle that reminds me of Vernon Reid on 'Cult Of Personality', and as I write that it occurs that the two bands share similarities in the way their heaviness can be hidden but ever present. Mike Godoy has a decent voice that I can imagine doing Pop Punk in another life, and the band behind him throw Metal, Pop and Funk about (some very sweet bass lines from Andrew Bushong) like talented mental patients. The album isn't very heavy on choruses, so can be a bit hard to get into, but the several spins it takes are worth it because there's a very talented, energetic band at work here.

'ReBirth' is an album that can't be neatly filed, featuring songs that seem to be there purely because the band liked them, not because they want to have any sort of signature sound. Personally, I'm not keen on the ballad 'Will You Love Me Tomorrow', but at least it's followed by the fast, melodic and heavy 'Running Wild'.

So what we have is a Heavy Metal band that's not really a Heavy Metal band, throwing a smorgasbord of tunes that each have their own delicious flavour. I'm not sure what they're going to try next, but there's plenty here for any discerning Rock and Metal fan.

Alan Holloway

CHASE THE ACE – 'ARE YOU READY?' *(Z)* — HARD ROCK

Israel is more famous for its ongoing conflicts and religious connotations than producing Rock bands, but that's exactly where Chase The Ace hails from. They have been around for a while under a different name and releasing albums in their native Hebrew, but 'Are You Ready' is their first English-language international release.

The immediate approach of CTA is of the Sleaze/Glam variety, but with none of the vain posturing normally associated with the genre. There is a healthy sense of humour apparent in the lyrics as tongues are firmly planted in cheeks throughout the bulk of this album, throwing in some Punky attitude and AC/DC-style Rock 'n' Roll riffage certainly adds to the enjoyment. The vocals of Rio Vito Peleg can grate occasionally as they veer somewhat off-kilter, but somehow add to the quirky and off-beat nature of the music.

High-octane Rockin' numbers like 'The Cat Is On The Loose', 'Rock Bottom Rock 'N' Roll', the heavier 'California', 'Raise Your Glass', the Van Halen-ish 'Tapped Out' and 'Take Me Home' rub shoulders with some surprisingly decent and melancholy ballads 'Change My Ways', 'Bring You Back' and 'Feel Like A Fool', while (possibly their nod to Spinal Tap's 'Lick My Love Pump') 'Morning Wood' is a gentle acoustic instrumental. The incendiary 'Dear Deamon' is something of a left-field oddity, as what promises to be a searing Rocker is let down by chorus that is wacky to say the least – you have to hear it to understand.

Definitely not an essential release with the amount of superb albums available this month, but that's not to say it's not worth checking out.

Ant Heeks

CHRIS BEVINGTON & FRIENDS – 'CHRIS BEVINGTON & FRIENDS' *(Independent)* — BLUES/SOUL

Chris Bevington was a new name to me, so my second question (the first being "who?" when this arrived for me to review) was "okay, who are his friends?" That could have been the deal breaker, as I was expecting one of those albums where every man and his dog are on it, with every track having a different singer and sounding at odds with the one before. What I got instead was a really, really good, cohesive Blues Rock album.

Bevington is something of a Blues veteran, having earned thirty years experience playing in a variety of bands. Unusually for a project like this, he is not the lead guitarist; he in fact handles the bass duties while at the same time delivering some very impressive, gutsy Blues Rock vocals. His friends basically form the rest of the band for the album. Guitars are handled by Jim Kirkpatrick, who will be familiar to many of our readers as the guitarist for FM, along with Scott Ralph, another respected player and song-writer who penned material for the likes of Robbie Williams and Michael Bublé. Paul Burgess, famed for his work with 10CC, is on the drums and The Climax Blues Band's George Glover contributes keyboards.

The songs are all excellent, whether it's the superb 'Dark Side Of Love', the Funky take on the Blues classic 'Crossroads' or the faithful rendition of 'I Don't Need No Doctor'. I like my Blues best when it's got a few extra ingredients, like a horns section or female backing singers and this album scores a big tick with me by having both. The female vocals are marvellous and are supplied by two more of Bevington's friends, Kate Robinson and Sarah Miller, both of whom are vocal coaches and members of the successful Steely Dan tribute act Nearly Dan.

If you enjoy Blues Rock, I can't find a single thing to dislike here. There's energy, the lead vocals are excellent, the playing tight, the solos perfect and the production terrific. If you enjoy Joe Bonamassa, Matt Schofield, Kenny Wayne Shepherd and the like, Chris Bevington would make an excellent addition to your collection. Most enjoyable!

James Gaden

CIVIL WAR – 'GODS AND GENERALS' *(Napalm)* — POWER METAL

An EP and album down the road from their much publicised split from Sabaton, the CW quartet of Rikard Sundén, (guitar) Oskar Montelius (guitar), Daniel Mullback (drums) and Daniel Myhr (keyboards), who teamed up with Astral Doors/Lion's Share vocalist Nils Patrik Johansson and Hell Patrol bassist Stefan "Pizza" Eriksson (and more recently guitarist Petrus Granar), have delivered album number two 'Gods And Generals'. You'll gather from that title that the septet are still in the realms of battles, wars, heroes and, unsurprisingly, sabre-rattling anthems which stomp and chant. And why not, because the band's debut self-titled EP announced CW in some style, while follow-up album 'The Killer Angels' confirmed this outfit as serious players in the Euro Power Metal market.

'…Generals' stays true to the course, keyboards employed to conjure up gigantic barrages of atmosphere as the three prong guitar attack bludgeons the hugely melodic bombardment home. In Johansson, CW have a versatile vocalist capable of keeping pace with the energy and vitality the music shows, while matching the theatrical side the style deserves. 'Admiral Over The Oceans' is a prime example; keys setting the scene, guitars careening from strident riffs to stinging solos as Johansson snarls and snaps for all he's worth. 'Bay Of Pigs' steps into a more Sabaton-like stompastamp as the beat judders with threatening force and huge backing vocals lift the atmosphere, adding the choir-like oomph this band thrive on. At times, the theatric side is taken too far; the piano and vocal intro to 'Braveheart' a little too "am-dram" for its own good, yet when the snare drum takes over and the guitars march into their expected place, another fist-pumping, chest-beating call to arms tumbles forth.

While still holding onto their past, Civil War are taking confident strides forward. The surprising departure of Montelius and Eriksson between the recording of this album and its release may be a setback. However, on the strength of 'Gods And Generals', hopefully it's only a minor blip on an otherwise steady course for what Civil War have is far too good to be frittered away cheaply.

Steven Reid

CONTROL THE STORM – 'BEAST INSIDE' *(Independent)* — HEAVY METAL

Although Control The Storm released an EP back in 2010, they experienced a litany of line-up changes in the years that followed. The band finally ossified in 2014 with the entrance of vocalist Kate Norris and drummer Nathan Hutchins. The result is 'Beast Inside,' the band's first full-length album and their true debut as a cohesive unit.

Norris commands the proceedings, as her voice is stout and soars effortlessly above the rhythmic typhoon. The classic tone of Becky Baldwin's Rickenbacker bass (think Geddy Lee) is a focus throughout, yet never detracts from the overall sound of the band. Her bass playing especially shines on 'Believe', 'Falling' and 'Twisted Truth' (which is one of three tracks re-recorded from the original EP).

The keyboards are another huge contributor to CTS's overall sound, juxtaposing traditional piano tones with modern synthesizer patches in the span of a single track. The keyboards on 'False Eternity' add a particularly unique flavor with an almost percussive effect that would be akin to an electronic vibraphone.

The fervent intensity that permeates throughout the album is countered with immense balance where no one element dominates. This is no better exemplified than on 'Nothing Hurts' where it is reminiscent of everything that makes DragonForce's 'Through The Fire And Flames' so enjoyable; fantastic melody, speed, momentum and musicianship.

Throughout 'Beast Inside,' Control The Storm show immense aplomb and maturity that belies the time that this latest incarnation of the band has spent together. This comes highly recommended to all fans of Female-Fronted Melodic Metal, especially relative newcomers in Whyzdom, Kalidia and Fyre!

Brent Rusche

CREPUSCULE – 'VIRR' *(Independent)* — PROGRESSIVE

I always knew that dropping French in my fourth year at school, plus my reluctance to embrace the German language during my many years living there, would come back to haunt me at some point. Well, that moment arrived when the DVD-style packaging of 'Virr' arrived at Crompton Towers. My heart sank as I absorbed the dramatic Pseudo-Baroque Gothic artwork, which immediately (but wrongly) conjured up connotations of Death/Doom Metal music. Things got even worse when I opened the accompanying ninety page booklet; yes, the expressive artwork really captures the imagination, but the text is written in German – "Nein! Nein!" I screamed! I nervously popped the album in the player and thankfully my sanity quickly returned.

Crepuscule (meaning Twilight) were founded back in 1984 by Gerald (guitar) and Franco

DESIGN – 'IN OTHER WORDS' *(FM)* — MELODIC ROCK

Imagine being on your summer hols on an idyllic Greek island (other islands are available). You're relaxing outside the local beachside taverna, garbed in your garish Bermuda print, sipping ice cold Ouzo and staring out across the unblemished, deep blue Aegean water; life is absolute bliss… except you're missing your fix of AOR… preferably provided by some home-grown talent. In that hypothetical scenario, you could do a lot worse than having Female-Fronted Design's debut album 'In Other Words' infiltrating your mind and creating your unforgettable holiday soundscape.

Originating from Athens in 2009, Design grew from the cogitations of Chris Crystal (drums) and Jimmy Serra (bass). In 2010 they were joined by Geo Mats (guitar), and shortly after, Johnny Sc (piano/keys) and Ili Kar (vocals); together they have fashioned an outfit that has produced a striking batch of songs which encapsulate that Greek aura of picturesque vistas, placid oceans and sedentary living whilst simultaneously instigating that late-night party vibe.

The title track gets the album off to a wonderful start with a brief atmospheric intro that quickly succumbs to lush keys and penetrating jabs of guitar; think Romeo's Daughter's 'Wild Child'… it's of that ilk. Kar's vocals are rather special too, as they swim effortlessly atop the lapping waves of 1980's AORness. To these ears Kar is a ballsy blend of Sue Willets (Dante Fox) and Julienne Regan (All About Eve), which is no bad thing, right? 'Breakout' and 'Every Day' maintain the impetus and quality; Mat's guitar breaks are short but sublime and enhance the provocative rhythmic melodies of Serra and Crystal. At the heart (no pun intended, but they are another obvious comparison) of the album is the band's tour-de-force; 'The Meaning Of Love' takes us briefly into quasi Jazz/Blues territory, featuring a delightful mid-song piano break by Sc followed by another feisty, yet controlled guitar solo. 'Fire Is In Your Heart' is the heaviest song on offer, but the swirling keys juxtaposed with riffing guitar create another gem. I kid you not, there are no fillers on this album; even the closing stages are occupied by songs that could so easily have been placed upfront – 'Hold Me' is reminiscent of Toto, with its subtle time change variations, and the album ends with the duet 'Only Heaven Knows', when Kar is joined by Michalis Smero (ex-Fortress Under Siege) who together deliver a passion-drenched, slow-tempo refrain worthy of concluding proceedings.

The Greek economy maybe in a rather fractious state at the moment, but if Design are representative of their country's Rock music scene at least one commodity is in the ascendancy. An essential summer soundscape? I'd prefer to say a soundscape for all seasons! Impressive!

Dave Crompton

FM – 'HEROES AND VILLAINS' *(Frontiers)* HARD ROCK

Though they scaled the dizzy heights of success back in the eighties, FM have gone some way to recapturing former glories since their 2007 reformation with hit albums, a series of successful tours and high-profile support slots and regular play-listing by the likes of Radio 2 and Planet Rock. Front-man Steve Overland has readily acknowledged that their monumental appearance at Firefest in 2007 was a huge contributing factor in what led to their resurgence. It's something that everybody here at Fireworks can be rightly proud of, especially Firefest legend Kieran Dargan for his incessant cajoling to actually reunite the band.

All the recent FM albums have their fair share of light and shade throughout the songs on offer. 'Heroes And Villains' itself has two ballads to speak of; 'Incredible' is the excellent, classic, lighter-in-the-air power ballad while the atypical 'Walking With Angels' is a serene, stripped-down acoustic piece (a first for FM) with subtle string effects, allowing ample expanse for Overland to wrap those golden tonsils around as only he can. However, the rest the album is a full-on, Hard-Rocking, guitar-driven, all-round thumpingly good anthemic barnstormer, yet it remains chock-full of the melodies that endeared us to the band all those years ago; think the classic FM sound of old updated for the here and now.

'Digging Up The Dirt' kicks things off in fine (and surprisingly heavy) style, a Def Leppard-sounding rhythm expanding into a huge Thunder-style groove with a dirty guitar riff from Jim Kirkpatrick, who has truly established himself as an integral part of the FM sound. It's followed by the simply magnificent 'You're The Best Thing About Me', a lively, uplifting Melodic Rock anthem with sumptuous melodies and harmonies that hit you from all sides – a track surely destined for heavy radio rotation. 'Life Is A Highway' is another lively Rocker with an eighties American feel whilst the dynamic 'Fire And Rain' drifts back to the Groove Rock sound of the opener, albeit with a more Classic Rock feel and topped with a screaming guitar solo.

Following the first of the aforementioned ballads, the pace is lifted with 'Call On Me', another lively, driving Rocker with the biggest chorus of the whole album. 'Cold Hearted' is resurrected from the 'Futurama' EP, 'Shape I'm In' is a "radio-friendly" Pop Rocker, 'Big Brother' is a darker, heavier grooving piece, 'Some Days I Only Wanna Rock And Roll' leans heavily towards The Rolling Stones with a touch of sax at the finale, 'I Want You' is wonderfully catchy and a nod back to FM's glorious past, leaving the acoustic ballad to close proceedings in a sedate but beautiful style.

Do I need to say more? It's FM – Flippin' Marvellous!

Ant Heeks

(vocals) Rouvinez, who were born in the French part of Switzerland. Their musical vision was to incorporate artistic and thematic influences whilst simultaneously remaining true to their native language. Now based in Karlsruhe on the French/German border, the brothers are joined by Dieter Taubert (guitar), Gunter Kern (keyboards), Thomas Geiger (bass) and Thomas Zimmer (drums). In 2006 they released 'Hymn A La Vie', the first chapter of a conceptual quadrilogy with 'Virr' being the second; it is something I will bravely label as Progressive Art Rock. Are you still with me? I hope so, as the music itself is rather inspiring!

'Virr' contains fifteen songs and tells a story (apparently) not dissimilar to George Orwell's '1984' – 'La Joie Du Corbeau Blanc' gets things underway; a conflation of Phantom Of The Opera, Les Miserables and Trans Siberian Orchestra. Initially a sombre soundscape, it soon transcends to one emblazoned with sunshine and harmony. The impassioned vocal delivery soon becomes a subconscious embellishment rather than an overt hindrance. The nine minute 'Les Corbeaux Noirs' is quite beautiful with its chorus-heavy guitar complementing a rhythm section which serenely pulsates throughout. The narrative and music continues to saunter its way into your psyche like a Renault Twingo weaving its way through the Loire Valley. Keyboards are the dominant force throughout this opus, but their innumerable guises always impress; 'La Genetique' has a Doors vibe to it, whilst 'Le Gout Du Miel', emanates early Genesis. The guitar interplay mustn't be ignored though; whether it be the delicate guitar picking of 'Et Le Vent Se Reveille', the heavy riffing of 'Ta Mort' or the soaring fret-work on 'Au Bord Du Goufre', you cannot fail to enjoy.

'Virr' is certainly a challenge, but I guarantee after several spins you'll find yourself humming along and spasmodically emitting a Gallic "hee-haw, hee-haw" supplemented by the occasional "sacre bleau"! Conversely, if you're a casual Progster this might just drive you in(seine)!

Dave Crompton

CRIMSON WIND – 'LAST POETRY LINE' *(Pitch Black)* POWER METAL

Crimson Wind, now there's a name that evokes the big, the bombastic and something rather regal. When combined with the sort of cover that would have drawn you in to make a speculative purchase back in the good old days and a title that intrigues, it is all so far so good.

'Last Poetry Line' is the second release by the Italian Power Metal band yet a follow-up almost never happened as lead singer Alessio Taormina quit to seek work in London and a lengthy search for a replacement drew a blank. On the verge of calling it a day, a tip off by a friend led them to Guido Macaione, what a find he has been! Blessed with a rich, powerful voice and impressive range, he has the perfect attributes to front a band such as this.

'Black Shelter' opens the album coming across something akin to Dream Theater's much under-rated debut album 'When Dream And Day Unite'. Macaione has a voice that is comparable to Charlie Dominici yet with more punch and a smoothness that was lacking in Dominici's delivery.

A decent opener it may be but the following title track is much, much better with a big, hard-hitting, galloping riff and a towering melody. In fact melody is the watch-word throughout the album; too many Power Metal/Progressive Metal bands over look strong melodies in favour of instrumental showboating. But not so CW, where the song comes first and only within its structure do the band spread their wings and show what they can really do.

While all of the musicians are clearly outstanding, keyboardist Diego Galati really shines. Adding deft touches of atmosphere in just the right places and never over playing his hand, he really adds to the majesty of this album. Whether it's the smooth layers of synths caressing over the main riff during 'Death Dwells In Sight', the dramatic orchestration during 'Still' or the beautiful haunting tiptoeing piano on the album's bonus track closer 'Farewell Is Forever', Galati's quality is stamped over it all.

There's many highlights on '...Line' and more that reveal themselves on each subsequent listen; 'In Vain', with its killer tune, ranks highly but the top award must go to the multi-faceted 'The Hills Gaze In Silence', a truly magnificent song in all respects and one that sees Macaione in his full glory.

Power and Progressive Metal may be a crowded field these days and competition is fierce, but Crimson Wind may have just forced themselves onto the top table with 'Last Poetry Line'.

Mick Burgess

DAMNATION ANGELS – 'THE VALIANT FIRE' *(Massacre)* SYMPHONIC METAL

When you read a promotional biography, you don't usually see the words "a band from Doncaster in South Yorkshire (England), who play a wonderfully intense style of Symphonic Progressive Metal". That however is what I read about Damnation Angels just before I played their second full studio release 'The Valiant Fire'. Being a proud Lancastrian myself, I wasn't expecting much from a band from Yorkshire (only joking!) but as soon as '...Fire' began to play, I was left trying to pick up my jaw which had fallen to the proverbial floor. The reason for this is that DA have recorded (in Ipswich of all places) an album of epic Progressive majesty that features some incredible orchestrated Symphonic passages which join the songs together. This orchestration is used beautifully throughout, never detracting from what the band do themselves, and William and John Graney (guitars, backing vocals and drums respectively) along with Per Fredrik "Pelle K" Asly (vocals) have come up with, simply put, one of the best albums of its kind that these ears have heard in quite some time!

Given each of the songs clocks in at an average of six minutes plus, I only have space to mention a few personal highlights. First up there's the epic 'The Frontiersman' with its sweeping arrangements, intricate musicianship, emotion-filled vocals and superb guitar work; this song just screams SYMPHONIC and it could easily put the Likes of Nightwish and Rhapsody (whichever version) to shame. Then there's the tantalising instrumental 'Everlasting', its driving guitar riff and wonderful orchestration really sums up and demonstrates what is best about this genre. The stunning and compelling arrangements the band use, never let your mind wander for a minute. Also worthy of mention is opener 'Finding Requiem' which builds from a slow start, that soon bursts into life with the guitars vocals and orchestration, blending seamlessly to create a powerful and spectacular song, that I've come back to on many an occasion. Finally we come to the brilliant closer 'Under An Ancient Sun' where once again DA take their time to set everything in motion, building multiple layers of sound that expand and grow as the song plays, until your surrounded by a sheer wall of musicality.

To say I wasn't expecting this to be such a great album would be an understatement, but everything about it is just wonderful. The songs are all first rate, the musicianship outstanding and the production does the whole album proud. On this showing Damnation Angels should, by rights, now be considered right up at the very top of the Prog/Symphonic Metal tree and their musical compatriots/competitors should be rightfully worried about just how good this lot really are.

Ian Johnson

DAN REED – 'TRANSMISSION' *(Zero One)* ROCK

Dan Reed is best known as the front-man for the cult Funk act The Dan Reed Network, the singer/guitarist/song-writer from Oregon has returned with another inspiring solo album that will undoubtedly move your inner soul to a higher level. As with his previous solo offerings, this third effort is filled with mellow tunes that show his deeper side, quite a different story from the adrenaline-infused songs of his work with TDRN, but equally captivating.

Soft and heartfelt melodies prevail throughout and the whole mood of the album seems to be a conscious effort to transport the listener to a different world. In fact, Reed himself stated that the release deals with issues like "finding hope in the midst of chaos and making peace with the enemy within" and the likes. Forget faster and slower tracks and welcome these mid-tempo cuts. As a result, picking a favourite track proves to be a difficult task. But if pushed, special mention must be given to the album closer 'She's Not You' where he gives his best vocal performance, the opener 'Broken Soul', 'Roll The Dice' and 'What Dreams May Come'. Sadly 'On The Metro' fails to make an impression on yours truly with some rather unconventional vocal lines and keyboard effects, but one unimpressive track out of thirteen great songs is certainly not a bad score.

The relentless touring man has once again resorted to PledgeMusic to fund his album whilst working with Bengan Jonasson on bass and Robert Ikiz on drums. The end product will be a treat to your ears and a healing remedy for your soul.

Mónica Castedo-López

DE LA MUERTE – 'DE LA MUERTE' *(Bakerteam)* HEAVY METAL

I'm always wary when a band announces that they have come up with "a new kind of Heavy Metal". De La Muerte are an Italian Metal band whose debut album makes just that claim with their "fresh, aggressive and modern hard 'n' heavy" approach. Fair enough, they do have a distinctive tone and style but interesting and as strong as this release is, in many ways it lacks something in overall substance to be making such grandiose claims from a new band.

In Gianluca Quinto and Christian D'Alessandro they have an excellent pair of Metal guitarists; powerful, fast and fundamental to DLM's sound, influenced by a Mexican/Latin feel. Instrumental opener 'Tequila Funeral' sets the scene, full of atmospheric keyboards and typical Mexican horns conjuring the barren, Spaghetti-Western type imagery before the guitars build over it leading to the Classic Metal riff of 'Fallen Angel'. 'Silver Bullet' swiftly follows with a more straight-forward Rock approach and some crunching guitar riffs – the first track release from the album with a video out there to check out. But the real difference that this band does have is in vocalist Gianluca Mastrangelo.

He certainly has the range and power for any Metal band, but a style that includes

FRÉDÉRIC SLAMA'S AOR – 'RETURN TO L.A.' *(FS)* — AOR

With thirteen critically acclaimed albums under his belt, French musician and producer Frédéric Slama has already been accepted as an institution in Melodic Rock. Early 2015 sees him continue to cement this status once again by releasing the fourteenth album under his project entitled simply but aptly AOR.

'Return To L.A.' has been eagerly awaited in Melodic Rock circles, with the names of the contributing artists creating quite a buzz among the listeners – especially those of Jesse Damon (Silent Rage), Paul Sabu (Only Child and Kidd Glove) and of course Tommy Denander. Overall, the direction '...L.A.' takes is quite similar to its immediate predecessors rather than the first albums Slama recorded under the AOR moniker. Whereas the early ones were rooted closer to a West Coast style, the majority of songs on the new AOR album are embedded in heavier, slightly feistier Melodic Rock sound aesthetics.

From the three tracks Sabu belts out flawlessly in his characteristic, raspy voice ('Victim Of My Own Desire', 'The Sign Of Fire', 'The Wisdom Of Eve') to the fabulous contribution by Damon ('Angels Never Sleep', 'The Breaking Point'), it's simply a collection of keyboard-laden, guitar-driven anthems embroidered with catchy, well-crafted choruses. 'The Trail To Your Heart' (sung by Tommy Funderburk of Airplay and King Of Hearts) and 'Dangerous To Know' (with Rick Riso of Chasing Violets) follow the very same recipe with the melodic, mid-tempo '99 Percent Chance Of Loving You' (featuring Bob Harris – Axe, Steve Vai) being perhaps only slightly mellower. There are a few moments on 'Return…' when the sound goes really soft, corresponding somewhat with the sound found on the early AOR albums. The musical background to Erika Norberg's (Yngwie Malmsteen) sensual, dreamy voice in ballad-esque 'Burning Rainbows' therefore tastefully blurs boundaries between West Coast/Lite AOR and Pop music, while the duo of Fontaine sisters (Mélissa and Sarah – Chasing Violets) embellish the melancholic ballad 'Love Remains The Same' with a perfect vocal harmony.

Even though 'Return To L.A.' is the fourteenth album by Slama's AOR, it is perhaps his best to date – striking the right balance between Melodic Hard Rock up-tempos and West Coast ballads all the while aided by the undoubted strength of this particular line-up and the immaculate production. In other words, all elements that contribute to the album's quality are in place here, the short span of time between this CD and its predecessor having no influence on quality whatsoever. Practice makes perfect, they say – and one can be sure that the fourteenth time around, Frédéric Slama knows full well how to make a perfect album. This new effort he has released – of course with a "little help from his friends"– is proof of this fact.

Alexandra Mrozowska

much in common with an Operatic Tenor and it's these passages of theatrical delivery that will define whether you will either love or hate the band. I can't deny the skill and accomplishment of the vocals, certainly of the highest order, but in places it almost seems to be an offering of style above substance. Musically and instrumentally the band sound great with a production that highlights their power and strength but the song-writing all seems a little generic. Based and inspired by the damned stories of the 'Nuestra Señora De La Santa Muerte', the Mexican Lady Saint of Death, seems to have restricted them musically, whilst Mastangelo has the freedom to use his voice in a multitude of styles.

There are plenty of highlights; 'Secret Witness', 'I Am Not A Legend' and 'I'm Alive' Rock with the best of them. On one level you've got to congratulate and admire De La Muerte for coming up with a Metal album that certainly is a bit different from the norm. But the mix of soaring top-end vocals and Operatic, theatrical presentation will surely lose as many listeners as it will attract. There is plenty on offer here to the open-minded Metal fan, but I'd wholeheartedly suggest you checkout the video and website before diving headfirst into the band.

Ian Parry

DEAD LUCKY – 'SONS OF LAZARUS' *(Dr. Music)* — HARD ROCK

Traditionally Rock and Metal has been seen as the preserve of the industrialised West, its roots and powerbase firmly encoded into the DNA of Western Europe and North America (with I suppose the odd glance of acknowledgement towards both Japan and Australia). However, with the unstoppable rise of the internet over the past couple of decades, it's become much more of a global phenomenon; meaningful bands from South America, Eastern Europe and even further afield are cropping up at increasingly regular intervals. All of which brings me on to Dead Lucky…

Hailing from Cape Town – I racked my addled brain and could only come up with Trevor Rabin and Stingray (remember them?) as fellow South Africans – DL are a ten-legged, bar room brawler of a band who take their lead from the likes of Motörhead, Danzig and Nashville Pussy. Formed about four years ago, the fearsome fivesome have built quite a reputation for themselves back home; festival appearances with the likes of Killswitch Engage, Trivium, Rival Sons and Wolfmother endearing them to a domestic crowd who, until recently, have been starved of Rock 'n' Roll. Now, with the release of debut album 'Sons Of Lazarus', it would seem they've now set their sights on Europe.

Filled with bile and attitude, their bruising, twin guitar driven sound comes charging out of the speakers with all the finesse of a stampeding buffalo herd hitting you square in the chest. Spoiling for a fight, its caustic "street Rock" attitude ain't particularly polite or pretty… nor was it meant to be. Yet, whilst adjectives such as "simplistic", "direct" and "uncompromising" readily spring to mind when describing any of the twelve tracks that make up '...Lazarus', there's a tribal, nay primal, charm to them that if harnessed properly could probably move mountains.

So, strap on your crash helmet and dive headlong into the caustic depths of tracks such as the strangely compelling 'The End Of The Day', the swaggering 'Sin City' or no nonsense title track 'Sons Of Lazarus' and you might actually find you rather enjoy what you hear. As I implied earlier, sweet and subtle don't seem to be in the collective Dead Lucky vocabulary, but if it's a dose of gritty realism you're after, they deliver that in spades.

And, whilst the likes of Mötley Crüe may stick two fingers up to the establishment from the comfort of their air conditioned limo's, this lot do it from the back of a beat up pickup with a couple of Kalashnikovs!

Putting the realism back into gutsy Rock 'n' Roll…

Dave Cockett

DEAD SHED JOKERS – 'DEAD SHED JOKERS' *(Pity My Brain)* — MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

The Dead Shed Jokers' debut album 'Peyote Smile' seemed to come from nowhere. Nevertheless, it was roundly praised by critics, leading to Classic Rock listing them as one of the 'Hottest New Bands In Britain' (March 2013) and the sublime 'Magic Teatime' appearing on the magazine's cover-mount. Of course, it hadn't really come from nowhere; it came from a shed in Aberdare.

Two years on and the DSJ are ready to unleash the self-titled follow-up to their stunning debut... or at least some of them are. The difficult second album proved to be just that, with the original rhythm section deciding to call time on their DSJ careers. Consequently, 'Dead Shed Jokers' is partly a musical testament to the original line-up's seven years together and partly, with replacements already in place, a confident step into the future.

There are two things about the DSJ that are particularly striking. First, they appear to have absorbed an astonishing range of influences without sounding like anyone. Secondly, their music carries an extraordinary pathos that is utterly unique and compelling. Imagine an early Black Sabbath-vibe with Kurt Cobain's angst, Jim Morrison's croon and Queens Of The Stone Age quirkiness and you start to get the idea. '...Jokers' picks up where '...Smile' left off. 'Dafydd's Song' has a monster riff and oozes raucous intensity, 'Delay The Morning' is brash and noisy, 'A Cautionary Tale' has a more gentle intro and a spooky vibe while 'Memoirs Of Mr Bryant' features some striking guitar work and an unusual vocal outro.

But it's really on the back four tracks that this album excels, with the band stretching out and punctuating the bombast with subtle, melancholic breakdown sections – most notably in 'Made In Vietnam' – and surprising touches. 'Love Is Diseased' is more reflective with prominent guitar work and a strong vocal performance from singer Hywel. You sense a whole person in the voice in a way that you don't with many other bands. 'Rapture Riddles' enters the fray with a lighter, almost Funky riff before it explodes and hits Thrash mode; not that it's without its more sensitive side – "all in all, we're all gonna die someday" croons Hywel in a striking Morrison-esque moment. Album closer 'Exit Stage Left' has a quirky piano-led Country edge and features a vocal suggestive of a Neil Young influence; it's lovely stuff.

Dead Shed Jokers sound and play like they mean it. It's not always easy to work out what "it" is – but that's part of their charm. Much, I think, depends on whether you like the basic sound and feel of the music and enjoy bands who strive to express themselves with scant regard for trends and genre boundaries. Personally, I do.

Michael Anthony

DEEP PURPLE – 'LONG BEACH 1971' *(earMusic)* — ROCK

1970 had seen the release of 'In Rock', the incredible album that turned Deep Purple from semi-Pop act with Rod Evans singing to screaming Rock band with Ian Gillan on vocals. The quintet of Gillan, Ritchie Blackmore, Roger Glover, Jon Lord and Ian Paice had a fiery, intense chemistry that resulted in one of the most powerful, talented live acts on the planet. This recording sees the band out on the road promoting the follow-up to that record, which was 'Fireball', released right around the time this concert was recorded. The band had yet to create the masterpiece that would be 'Machine Head', so the emphasis here was on the material they had to hand. My problem with that is you have a seventy-one minute live recording here – spanning a mere FOUR songs!

Kicking off with 'Speed King', the band is on fire. Gillan shrieks his way through the thunderous version which dissolves after a couple of minutes into a band jam, turning a five minute track into an eleven minute epic. This is where opinions will differ; I'm acutely aware Purple see themselves as a primarily instrumental band, so if you are keen to hear Blackmore and Lord improvising for seven or eight minutes, this is right up your street. If, like me, you prefer to hear more actual songs, then this can make for a frustrating experience.

To showcase 'Fireball', the band opts for 'Strange Kind Of Woman', which again is an excellent rendition, before another extended jam session. By the time it's finished, you're twenty minutes into the show and have heard two songs.

'Child In Time' sees Gillan deliver an array of ludicrously high screams before the band take off on another instrumental meandering which finally finds its way back to the conclusion after nearly fifteen minutes and some truly bizarre waffling from Gillan. The show ends with 'Mandrake Root' – far from my favourite Purple song in the arsenal, even at this early stage in their career – and it spans a whopping twenty-seven minutes.

If you prefer a few more songs for your money, you would probably be better served with one of the later live albums where the songs stretch out to usually ten minutes with the odd twenty minute jam thrown in. However, if you really enjoy the instrumental improvising Purple did so well back in the seventies, this concert will serve you well, as the band are in amazing form and the re-mastering is top drawer. For the early diehards only, I think.

James Gaden

DEFY ALL REASON – 'THE ROAD AHEAD' *(Independent)* — HARD ROCK

'The Road Ahead' is the debut offering from Welsh (Wrexham to be precise) quartet Defy All Reason. Funded by the ever-popular PledgeMusic style campaign, it follows their acclaimed 2013 E.P. 'Every Second Counts' which led to support slots with the likes of Breed 77, Jettblack and Jake E. Lee's Red Dragon Cartel.

DAR are hard and heavy in all the right places but with the perfect balance of melody. They tap into a commercial Contemporary Metal sound somewhat in the vein of Nickelback (before they turned shit) and underpin it with hints of a Southern slant akin to Black Stone Cherry. I also detect whiff of Grunge (excuse me while I wash my mouth out after using the "g" word!) surfacing on the heavier numbers from time to time, but don't let that put you off. The big guitars surge to the forefront of their sound whilst the rhythm section creates some impressively hard-hitting grooves with interesting and occasionally unorthodox arrangements. The big hooks add a hint of late eighties and early nineties Prime Time Arena Rock as well.

Still unsure? Then check out the crushing opener 'Midnight Train', the Furyon-style groove of 'Bad Taste Of You', the commercial 'Shame' and 'I Run', the Alter Bridge spiralling riff of 'Because Of You' and the epic sounding 'Redemption'. If ballads are your thang then DAR have them in spades; 'Behind Those Eyes' and 'Finding My Way (Back To You)' are slightly downbeat

with a heavy element that creeps in, the former also including a stunning lengthy guitar solo, while 'The Only One' is more uplifting with its blend of lighters-in-the-air Arena Rock and the current Lynyrd Skynyrd Southern sound.

Their Southern-meets-Grunge-lite cover of Bon Jovi's immortal 'Wanted Dead Or Alive' is passable but unnecessary and possibly a step too far onto hallowed ground (funny, if they'd covered something newer like 'Have A Nice Day' I wouldn't have batted an eyelid – then again, would anybody cover that?).

That aside, it's a damn fine debut effort worth investigating.

Ant Heeks

DISTRICT 97 WITH JOHN WETTON - 'ONE MORE RED NIGHT – LIVE IN CHICAGO' *(Cherry Red/Primary Purpose)* PROGRESSIVE

This set is taken from a gig recorded in October 2013 with the nine tracks before us representing the second part of the evening in question; part one comprising of District 97's own material. In a way it's a terrific shame that the powers that be didn't see fit to give us the entire show; presumably they felt the lure of John Wetton's name would sell more units. From my perspective, I would have liked to have seen this as a two disc item with this being a bonus to the band's set.

For me King Crimson have always occupied the more challenging end of the Prog spectrum; some of their material proving to be impenetrably complex and lacking in melody. Certainly I'd put the opening three tracks into that category but after that they mine the more tuneful areas of the KC catalogue.

The band (Leslie Hunt – vocals, Jim Tashjian – guitar, Rob Clearfield – keyboards, Patrick Mulcahy – bass and Jon Schang – drums) are extremely adept and given their relative youth and the musical complexity involved, one would have to say they are exceptionally gifted, make that virtuoso. Wetton is on pretty decent form vocally too; after a few years battling his demons, which impacted his performance, he's definitely back and delivering to expectations.

The highly talented Hunt takes a back seat here but her interventions, particularly on 'The Great Deceiver' and 'Lament' (where she duets with Wetton), give the songs a freshness and an interesting twist, making them different to the original versions.

After the tumultuous opening of 'One More Red Nightmare', the aforementioned '… Deceiver' and 'Lament', they pause for the more sedate 'The Night Watch'. Despite being a gentle tune, the prowess required to deliver the rapid vocal phrasing is incredible and it finds Wetton on his game. 'Fallen Angel' has a delightful ballad section which is amazingly simple compared to the rest of the track once the power kicks in.

'Book Of Saturday' is a highlight, partly due to its simplicity using Tashjian's plucked guitar and Wetton's voice. Of course there's no escaping Crimson's iconic '21st Century Schizoid Man' which D97 execute impeccably. The real highlight for me is the superb 'Starless' where both Wetton and Tashjian are excellent throughout and Schang really gets to show his chops during the second, heavier section as he does when the track segues seamlessly into UK's 'Easy Money' which provides a suitably rousing conclusion to the set.

Impressive without a shadow of a doubt but I suspect of limited interest outside of Crimson completists.

Gary Marshall

EDEN'S CURSE - 'LIVE WITH THE CURSE' *(AFM)* HARD ROCK

Eden's Curse returned home to Scotland on November 28th 2014, their task was to play a concert in front of a sold-out audience at Glasgow's Classic Grand. They also decided that it would be a good idea to record the show for posterity. The end result was a hundred minutes plus of classy Melodic Hard Rock/Metal played in front of rabid partisan crowd – an enticing prospect I hope?

As soon as 'Live With The Curse' starts and the band hit the stage on that night, you can tell that they had their fans in the palms of their hands. From the first note until the very last one fades away, they simply could do no wrong. This is mainly down to the fact that the five men put on such powerful performances (six if you count those in attendance) and played eighteen songs taken from the band's four albums with such a relish and passion that they make you wish you'd been there on that hot Glasgow night.

So why not do yourselves a favour and spend a couple of hours in the company of 'Symphony Of Sin', 'Break The Silence', 'Masquerade Ball', 'Black Widow', 'Trinity', 'Fly Away', 'Just Like Judas', 'Fallen From Grace', 'Jerusalem Sleeps', 'Time To Breathe', 'Rock Bottom', 'Devil In Disguise', 'Wings To Fly', 'No Holy Man', 'Unbreakable', 'Judgement Day', 'Evil & Divine' and lastly 'Angels & Demons'; they are all here for your delight and enjoyment.

Though it's not just these wonderful songs that make this album one you should want to own, it's the performances from the band themselves and the way they interact with the crowd that makes this live album something special. Paul Logue's witty banter is warmly enjoyed by the fans whilst his bass playing is out of this world, Thorsten Koehne's guitar work is stunning and the interplay between keyboardist Steve Williams and drummer John Clelland is at times mesmerising. But for me, the real star of the show is the band's newish vocalist Nikola Mijic (Dreylands). He really puts in one hell of a turn on this release; he was brimming with confidence, commanded the stage and demanded the audience pay attention and his passionate delivery is reciprocated and loved by those present who sang along with him to every word of every song.

Like bands of old, Eden's Curse have gone down the old-school route of recording albums. Firstly a few back to back studio releases then a live album to finish off chapter one of the Curse saga. Now let's hold our breath for chapter two, whilst enjoying one of the best live albums I've heard in quite some time.

Ian Johnson

HALESTORM – 'INTO THE WILD LIFE' *(Atlantic)* HARD ROCK

Halestorm have come such a long way in such a short space of time and I have tracked every step of that progress with satisfying interest and critical delight. I am a huge fan of female vocals and Lzzy Hale's talent was obvious, even from the first low key EP release. Along with brother Arejay Hale (drums), Joe Hottinger (guitar) and Josh Smith (bass), the band have taken a Classic Rock musical blueprint, modernised it and made it their own. That quality was recognised by the band's peers and saw Grammy success for the song 'Love Bites (So Do I)', taken from sophomore record 'The Strange Case Of.....'. However, those expecting "Part 2" may be surprised by 'Into The Wild Life'.

The new songs were recorded live in a church-turned-studio in Nashville with producer Jay Joyce. The musical styles are more varied, often reflective, and the "in your face" approach has been replaced by a song-writing ethic that is more mature and diverse. It is certainly a sign that Lzzy Hale is not afraid to take risks and a further indication that development and creativity are intrinsic if a band is to evolve and avoid stagnation.

'Scream' has a hypnotic tribal drum pattern at its core and is sedentary compared to previous album openers 'It's Not You' and 'Love…'. The writing on '…Life' encompasses so many emotions and themes and this is highlighted by the 'Bad Girl's World' and 'Gonna Get Mine' one/two. By no means complex, but worlds away from the likes of older songs such as 'Dirty Work' and 'I Get Off'.

'Mayhem' (previewed during the encore on the 2014 U.K. tour) is a brooding monster that stalks and strikes in equal measure. There is nowhere to hide from the menacing vocals and cutting riffs and solos. There is a lyrical depth running through a number of songs ('Dear Daughter', 'The Reckoning' and 'What Sober Couldn't Say') that accompanies the more thoughtful musical arrangements perfectly. Anthems come in the form of 'Apocalyptic' and 'I Like It Heavy'; both tracks come towards the album's end and I can see them becoming an integral part of the live set for years to come as they have energy to burn and just scream crowd involvement. Vocally Lzzy Hale is on top form throughout and it is easy to see why she has become so popular with artists outside the Rock music genre.

'Into The Wild Life' may alienate existing fans because of its organic values but for me it is easily the best release of 2015 so far and the one to beat during the remaining ten months…. simply excellent!

Dave Bott

ELDORADO – 'BABYLONIA HAZE' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

It's strange, isn't it? There are so many bands ploughing the Retro furrow these days, that Retro is almost Contemporary now. The latest band to hover into my view is Madrid-based Eldorado. Their previous albums ('Golden', 'Antigravity Sound Machine' and a Spanish-language debut) passed me by, but I am tempted to hunt them down such is the strength of latest effort 'Babylonia Haze', which is also available as a native-tongue version ('Karma Generator').

There is an abundance of moods and styles that flow throughout 'Babylonia…', while the hooks come at you from all sides. Opener 'Mad Woman' bursts into life with a flurry of yelps and power-chords before cantering off in a fiery Deep Purple vein – the similarity is accentuated by some swirling Hammond Organ flurries from front-man Jesús Trujillo (which would have drawn nods of approval from the late, great Jon Lord) that spiral in and out of the distinctly Blackmore-ish riffs of Andrés Duende, while the busy drumming of Christian Giardino is straight from the Ian Paice book of exquisite rhythmic techniques. The following track 'Evil People' has an uncompromisingly unorthodox and complex rhythm, while the Hammond Organ is pushed right to the forefront of the sound.

However, the third song demonstrates it's not all Purple-style artistry, one of the facets I really like about this album is the incorporation of a Folk-orientated sound on the haunting acoustic number 'Breathe The Night'; the Folk element is also explored later on the similarly structured, yet more uplifting, 'Resurrection Song'. 'Goodbye & Carry On' is built around a denser, almost Black Sabbath-sounding riff, yet the hard, Rocking Bluesy nature of the song leans more towards Led Zeppelin, albeit with a more anthemic chorus, while the soft middle section of the song accentuates the heaviness of the riff when it grinds back into action – a definite album highlight. 'I'll Be Satisfied' and 'You Don't Wanna Need Her' are the other lively tracks that follow the Classic Rock formula.

The eight minutes of 'Flowers Of Envy' is slow-burning, powerfully anguished Blues and would take the honour of the album's pièce de résistance, if it wasn't for the stunning, eleven-plus minute epic 'Karma Generator'; it fades slowly in and builds the mood gently as each instrument subtly creeps in, then begins to simmer over at the halfway point then at eight minutes picks up the pace and roars towards the flurry of power-chords at its climax – it's a little bit 'Child In Time', a little 'Freebird' and a little 'Stairway To Heaven' – absolutely stunning. After such an intense song the delicate ballad 'Moon Girl' calms the mood down with a hint of Psychedelia to close a highly recommended album.

Ant Heeks

ELEVANT – 'DREAMFACE' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Simply hailing from Liverpool doesn't exactly offer you forward as the next "Fab Four" but it does tend to give people a psychological urge to want to play an album from any band from that part of the U.K.

Slightly experimental in nature and mastered by Pete Maher (Jack White, U2) there's a Retro vibe throughout this, the band's second offering. Band leader and main song-writer Michael Edward certainly has the nous and confidence to make "mind twisting" music; changing tempo, mood and beat all in the space of one song without making it sound contrived.

'Snapshots' combines the melody of The Doors with the Fuzz Rock of The Datsuns, whilst 'Nothing' is perhaps what Motörhead would sound like if they added Psychedelic touches. This certainly won't be for everyone and it's not massively accessible, hummable or mainstream and yet it's dynamic, challenging and refreshing. However, the retro production lends itself to the material.

'In Ourselves We Trust' has a Rival Sons vein running through it and there's certainly a sense that Edward has been listening to The Black Keys, but it's more aggressive and vocally far more honest and stripped back than anything that has gone before. 'Mood Manipulator' perhaps typifies more than anything what's going on here with its changes in style, mood and musical direction, indicating that 'Dreamface' is perhaps the most original Rock album released in 2015 thus far.

Mike Newdeck

EMERALD – 'METAL REDEMPTION' *(Azura)* HEAVY METAL

We all need a Metal redemption, right? Well, we probably do, but I'm not sure what one actually is. What I do know is that U.S.-based Emerald want to give us one whether we want

it or not, with guitars to eleven and all that. Emerald are one of those bands who had a go in the mid-eighties and have since been on a thirty year break, reforming to dig out some old Hard Rockin' riffs and provide Metal for the masses.

Opening instrumental 'Tardigrade Raid' (for fact fans, a tardigrade is a water-dwelling, segmented micro-animal, with eight legs) is promising enough, with lively playing from band boss Jeff Melin. After that though, we are transported back to the mid-eighties, when Emerald were just another average Metal band playing average Metal in small clubs. 'Edges Of Tomorrow', for example, is a Doomy trudge down memory lane to the pubs of my youth, where spotty youths would trot out six and a half minute songs that would drone on until they seemed like six hours. Melin's vocals are a bit like Ozzy Osbourne's and, to be honest, Emerald do have a Black Sabbath-like vibe at times… just not the good stuff.

'Metal Redemption' is about as bog standard a Heavy Metal album as you're ever likely to hear. It's not awful, and the guys obviously know what they're doing, but it never gets going and doesn't have a single shred of originality anywhere. There's a few nice riffs and some good solo work but in the end there's no real outstanding reason to buy.

Alan Holloway

EMPIRES OF EDEN – 'ARCHITECT OF HOPE' *(MelodicRock)* POWER METAL

I used to watch Sesame Street when I was a lad and those little muppets were always banging on about co-operation. With the likes of Avantasia, Revolution Saints and many more clearly proving that playing well with others can be a good thing, Empires Of Eden's Stu Marshall has once again cosied up with a raft of Metal vocalists and a thirty-piece orchestra for the fourth Empires Of Eden album.

The album features the likes of Ralph Scheepers (Primal Fear), Jeff Martin (Racer X), Mike Dimeo (Riot/Masterplan) and Rick Altzi (Masterplan), all masters in the Power Metal craft. As to what songs they sing on, I don't really know because the info sheet is about as useful as Dave Lee Roth at a sponsored silence. The album doesn't start too well with the plodding 'Vanish In The Light', and I was readying myself for a bit of a Doom-fest, livened up by Marshall's always impressive solo guitar work. Thankfully there's life in the old dog yet, and the rest of the album is an improvement, starting with the aggressive title track voiced by the ever impressive Scheepers. The album is basically a pretty decent Power Metal staple, held together by Marshall's guitar heroics, although it doesn't deliver anything earth shattering. None of the tracks are in any way poor (except the opener, but that's just my personal taste), but you'll certainly have heard it all before.

'Architect Of Hope' is guaranteed to please fans of the previous albums, as it does exactly what it's supposed to. The only problem is that within the bombast, aggression and melody there is, well, nothing much. The songs are perfectly fine, the performances hard to fault, but overall it lacks a killer punch that would allow it to play with the real big boys of the genre. That said, that's no reason for fans to be worried, as the music is as "in your face" as ever. For me, however, Empires Of Eden are great but fall a little short of greatness.

Alan Holloway

ENFORCER – 'FROM BEYOND' *(Nuclear Blast)* HEAVY METAL

Ever just sat there and longed for those carefree early 1980's days when Metal was ours and ours alone; a much maligned art form appreciated by the enlightened few before the corporate fat cats got a hold of it and turned it into an ever more garish pastiche to feed the insatiable, yet ultimately feckless media machine?

Well if you have fear not, you're not alone because Swedish Metalheads Enforcer have made it their lifelong mission to pander to the needs of the "chosen ones". Fusing together the youthful exuberance of the NWOBHM and the burgeoning early 1980's U.S. scene – think Armored Saint, Virgin Steele and the odd nod towards the Thrash explosion unleashed by Metallica – and then overlaying it all with a patriotic sense of their own history a la Heavy Load, Enforcer forego any unnecessary gimmickry or frills and take the route one approach as they go straight for the jugular!

With titles like 'The Banshee', 'Hell Will Follow' and 'Destroyer' (no, not that one!) it isn't what you'd call particularly erudite or pretty, but then again, if that's what you were expecting you've really kinda missed the point. No, Enforcer are much more primal than that, their riff strewn, aural assault a clarion call to the faithful, a battle cry for the disenfranchised to give them both focus and a kindred spirit in their search for something to rail against.

That's what Metal was really all about back then, and whilst it's not that Enforcer aren't without the occasional moment of clarity or even the odd slightly more grandiose idea or two – just listen to the lengthy intro to 'Farewell' or the beguiling, nay harrowing, 'Mask Of The Red Death' (think Savatage meets Accept, it's by far the best cut on the album in my book and a direction I'd love to see them follow more in the coming years) and you'll see there's a definite creative intelligence at work – it's just that they've elected to capture the mood of the movement rather than overplay their hand. And to their credit, if your primary goal is to shed a bit of dandruff and lose yourself in a moment of fist waving, head-banging fury, they've pretty much nailed it.

About as undiluted and pure as you'll get these days, if anyone ever tries to tell you that old-school Metal is dead, stick seven lace holes up their backside and crank 'From Beyond' up to a Spinal Tap-esque eleven!

Dave Cockett

ESSENZA – 'BLIND GODS AND REVOLUTIONS' *(SG)* HEAVY METAL

Formed in Italy during 1993 by guitarist Carl Rizzello and his brother Alex on bass guitar, this is Essenza's fourth release; new drummer Paolo Colazzo completes the current line-up. Despite the band claiming such musical influences as Deep Purple, Judas Priest and Van Halen, there is little here in their own music to compare. A mixture of Progressive Metal would be more apt as a description.

'Plastic God (An Autumn Dream)', like so many songs on this release, suffers from some very poor vocals, no doubt due to English not being Carlo Rizzello's native language. That said, the music has an Iron Maiden influence and some interesting musical passages so it's clear the band lack nothing when it comes to their musicianship.

Old-school Thrash Metal comes to mind with 'Bloody Spring' and this is as close to a winning formula as the band gets, in my opinion. Despite the impressive guitar work, 'The Song Inside' gets a little muddled musically and it left me reaching for the skip button.

'Seagull In The Night' (despite the awful title) is at least an attempt at something different. It is an acoustic-based ballad that unfortunately sounds like something you would hear in a back street Italian restaurant.

HASSE FRÖBERG & MUSICAL COMPANION - 'HFMC' *(Glassville)* PROGRESSIVE

Whilst I thoroughly enjoyed the previous albums from Hasse Fröberg and his companions, Thomsson (bass), Ola Strandberg (drums), Kjell Haraldsson (keyboards) and lead guitarist Anton Lindsjö, with this, their third album, they've produced something quite outstanding. I've already added this to my list of contenders for year-end honours, it's that good!

It's been a while coming due to injury and family bereavements but the wait has been more than worth it with the creation of some sensational songs, including writing contributions from Strandberg and not just Fröberg. What this proves is that it's not just The Flower Kings cohort Roine Stolt who can write memorable melodies and refrains.

The album comprises of ten tracks but in effect tracks one and ten are short instrumentals that bookend eight fulsome songs. 'Seconds' will be the perfect introduction music to a gig as it sets up 'Can't Stop The Clock' perfectly. This is a wonderfully constructed seven minutes of music that has some TFK traits but also includes Hard Rock and even Metal motifs which keeps things very interesting. The chorus is absolutely gorgeous, a theme that is consistent across the entire album.

'Everything Can Change' is a diverse yet cohesive song where some of the vocal arrangements put me in mind of 10CC and Queen, while the change to Jazzy guitar and piano solos is inspired. The track is superbly melodic throughout and the guitar solos are a wonder to behold. 'Pages' is a fifteen-minute epic that moves through so many different styles yet never feels the least bit disjointed. The track builds and the vocal arrangement hints at Transatlantic but other passages are redolent of Yes, both Jon Anderson and Trevor Rabin eras. There's a distinctly Steve Howe-type guitar solo which suddenly morphs into a dual guitar thing akin to The Allman Brothers.

'Genius' is already in my mind as "Song Of The Year' material and is a plaintive track about dying young. Starting acoustically it picks up pace towards the end, Fröberg's melancholic vocals are rather special as are the lyrics. 'In The Warmth Of The Evening' is yet another delight. There's Supertramp-like electric piano and beautifully lush Hammond Organ that puts me in mind of early Deep Purple. Vocally there are instances where it sounds as if Joey Tempest (Europe) has put in an appearance. The extended instrumental passage is terrific.

'Someone Else's Fault' could be an anthem of our times with more brilliant lyrics. Wonderfully melodic, again, I love the mid-track switch to a Blues section that screams Thunder. 'Something Worth Dying For' is heavy with great riffs, being almost Euro Metal in places, highlighting the band's ability to tackle any style successfully.

Gary Marshall

It would seem the band has their hearts in the right place, but so much of the music is lost due to the primitive vocals.

Ray Paul

FRANK ROHLES – 'TIME MOVES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS' *(CastleO)* ROCK

With this review, I have the opportunity to introduce you to Frank Rohles, an extraordinary guitarist and singer who has convinced me, and many fans of his numerous projects with nameable members, to love his very special way to interpret and play music; his music is incredibly energetic, personable and authentic. Back in 2004, he was even chosen to be part of the cast of the German version of the 'We Will Rock You' musical and he also got to perform together with Brian May and Roger Taylor on German TV.

Rohles' sixth album 'Time Moves In Mysterious Ways' – a play on the phrase 'God moves in mysterious ways' – was released in November 2014 and I came across it by chance at one of his concerts. "It mainly deals with the topic of time running away too fast whereas many of us forget to cherish the moment…", states Rohles.

'Time' is a very energetic and catchy up-beat Rocky opener. Rather heavy, 'Let Us Open Up' starts with an orchestral introduction which hands over to punching guitars and also shows the variety of instruments used on this record. 'Time And Time Again' is that kind of song you want to play to the love of your life, a beautiful piano-based ballad with an outstanding guitar-solo; even early Bon Jovi couldn't have done better. 'A Wonder', a very Poppy, Funky and absolutely terrific track was written to become a platform for Marc Rohles (his sixteen year old son) to present his excellent skills on the Hammond Organ. 'Here By Me' is an epic track that comes along with beautiful lyrics alongside some quality instrumentation and song-writing. The softer beginning progresses to a massive Melodic Rock climax. 'Tonight' is driven by its thumping beat and a brilliant piano melody which is spiced up with Funky guitar effects and Modern Rock influences. 'Safe Heaven', 'Too Late This Time' and 'Romantic Landscape' (instrumental) are three more ballad-like tracks that are, just like the rest, packed with variety and ingenuity.

Word limits prevent me from talking about all the fourteen songs but all I really need to mention is that this is one of the most varied – musically, stylistic and instrumentally – best written, most hearty and authentic records I've heard in a while. The only little downer are the programmed drums.

Frank Rohles is an exceptional artist who pours his passion, his love and profound thoughts into his music and delivers a high-quality production which can be ordered via www.frankrohles.de. His very unique voice and the very diverse stylistic elements from Pop, Rock, Funk and Blues, mixed up with fresh ideas, make 'Time Moves In Mysterious Ways' one of my albums of the year so far.

Julia Braun

FRIED GOAT – 'FRIED GOAT' *(Outhouse Vinyl)* SOUTHERN/COUNTRY/FOLK

Country-flavoured, gritty and gravel-soaked Southern Rock with a distinctive Blues/Country vibe is exactly what Fried Goat presents. No clean-cut production, no huge sugary

choruses, just a bunch of guys in their jeans and flannel shirts doing their own authentic thing. And as much as we like to pretend we're too sublime or too "glossy 1980's-oriented" type listeners to embrace this type of music, an experience of coming across an album that's as genuine as this Georgia/South Carolina-based band's second self-titled effort is somewhat cathartic. Due to the fact of FG having definitely a "thing" for goats – the whole section on their website related to those cute animals! – and a bit uneasy feeling it evokes, we'd better skip the theoretical background. Let's focus on fourteen pieces of music that 'Fried Goat' is comprised of.

For the most part, the path FG follows is trod by their outlaw Country favourites as well as the likes of Tom Petty or Lynyrd Skynyrd. There's a couple of tracks driven by the groovy, somewhat distorted sound ('Remember', 'Just Ok') juxtaposed with slightly Poppier songs 'Roller Derby Queen' or Christmas-themed 'Barn' that bring to mind the organic musical aesthetics of the 1970s.

The rest of the material oscillates between Bluesy mid-tempos ('Henry's Revenge', 'Two States Away') and Boogie-tinted, Blues-flavoured Southern Rock ('Nothing You Can Say', 'Takeaway' or the band's own rendition of The Charlie Daniels Band's 1974 classic 'Long Haired Country Boy'). As for the ballads, 'Young Runaway' and 'Short End Of The Stick' gravitate towards acoustic-based Country music whereas 'Guilt Trip' is more dramatized and Blues-infused, with some distant echoes of Skynyrd's staple 'Freebird'. The album finishes with mostly instrumental 'Fake Lumberjack Blues', the same acoustic Americana vibe to it as it was to the charming yet short interlude 'Don't Feed The Animals'.

With bands like FG, you'd better beware so as not to confuse authenticity to the music with the simplistic quality to it. The Southern Rock/Country/Blues aesthetics they utilize might not be too sublime itself, but the group proves much about their skill and musical sensitivity throughout the whole album.

In the end, their music remains genuine and straightforward, but there's also a whole richness of sounds to it – lush guitar work, dense Bluesy sounds intertwined with melodic Country-ish ditties along with some 1970's Southern Rock references; plus, there's simply certain listening pleasure in it.

Fried Goat's self-titled sophomore effort is thus recommended to everyone who feels like travelling down the American South. Such a trip is surely worth it in musical terms.

Alexandra Mrozowska

FUGITIVE – 'BLACK PLANET' *(Cat)* MELODIC ROCK

With every second review in the Melodic Rock world seemingly having, by law, to contain the word Sweden in it somewhere (that's EU-MHR legislation complied with), it's a pleasure to bring you an album of classy, rounded Melodic Rock that is as home-grown and British as fish and chips, bulldogs and the Royal Family (okay scratch that last one on a technicality...). The band in question is Fugitive, a name anyone in the biker community will doubtless already be well aware of what with the four-piece being regulars at numerous biker rallies across the country.

A quick-fire EP, 'Fuelled And Ready', whet the appetite last year before their 2008 debut album, 'In Transit' received a welcome re-issue. However, including all those excellent EP cuts, 'Black Planet' is the band's first full-length release in seven years and not only is it worth the wait, it is also an impressive step-up in class from '…Transit' which itself received many favourable words.

Amazingly 'Black Planet' marks twenty-five years in the business for Fugitive and while they maybe haven't been studio regulars, there's no denying that they've put that time to good use. This is a confident set of songs where a touch of Tyketto grazes a Sleazy strut via sing-along choruses and some clever interludes. The likes of 'Fuel', 'I'll Be There', 'Missing You' and 'Crazy' crank out the riffs with the crackling fret-fireworks immediately setting heads to "bang" and fists to "pump the air".

Fugitive are unquestioned natives of this hook-laden habitat; squeals and wails of delight emanating from Ranko's guitar, singer Mikee utilising a cleverly carefree approach to add a swagger that many more precise singers simply fail to muster. High notes aren't a problem, long notes aren't an issue and when married to a powerfully energetic delivery, the effect is unquestionably convincing. Surprises come in the shape of the heartfelt 'Starlight', while the acoustic instrumental 'Daisy, Roger, Zak & The Bumblebee', is one of those unexpected detours that really gives an album character. It is also note-worth that they released the title track as a single with all the profits going to the charity NABD (National Association Of Bikers With A Disability).

Fugitive are one of those rare things, a U.K. band who truly know how to take the Melodic Rock blueprint and make it their own, thus making 'Black Planet' a beacon of light in the gloom of mundane.

Steven Reid

KISKE/SOMERVILLE – 'CITY OF HEROES' (Frontiers) HARD ROCK

Five years after their self-titled debut 'Kiske/Somerville', German Metal vocal legend Michael Kiske (ex-Helloween, Unisonic, Place Vendome, Avantasia) and outstanding vocal authority Amanda Somerville (Trillium, Avantasia, HDK) now present us with their second release 'City Of Heroes'. The two singers are joined by excellent guitarist Magnus Karlsson (Primal Fear, PV), the almighty bassist Mat Sinner (Sinner, PF, Voodoo Circle) and very young and highly talented drummer Veronika Lukešová (Doctor Victor, Rock Meets Classic).

'City Of Heroes' opens with the title-track which is a highly energetic, up-tempo Melodic Hard Rock track with a catchy chorus and very fine guitar riffs. It clearly showcases how well the two vocalists work together even though their actual vocal abilities rather develop their full potential as the album progresses. 'Walk On Water' gave me goose bumps when I heard it for the first time. The first couple of seconds let one know it's a great Symphonic-influenced track with a lot of guitar work and great lyrics. This track reminds me of 'Over The Hills And Far Away', the Nightwish version, and could easily have been penned by this most Symphonic Finnish Metal band. 'Rising Up', 'Salvation' and 'Lights Out' arrive with inventive melodies alongside a good use of keyboards and drums. Unfortunately, they're all a bit too cheesy regarding the lyrics and therefore all too predictable. 'Breaking Neptune' is a fantastic, character-full composition of strong and sophisticated vocals, heavy drums and fantastic axe work. The absolutely outstanding, emotional, soft and simply wonderful ballad 'Ocean Of Tears' represents modern Classic Music (with varied influences) at its best; perfectly balanced in sound and production. 'Open Your Eyes' and 'Last Goodbye' are nice, positive-sounding, drum-influenced counterparts to the previous ballad. 'After The Night Is Over' is another exceptional, very melodic, almost longing track. Whereas the brilliantly composed acoustic guitars and orchestral elements create a marvellous atmosphere anyway, the vocal skills of both singers can be heard in all their facets and almost make one stand in awe at the results. 'Run With A Dream' and 'Right Now' complete this album as two more up-beat, Melodic Rock pieces with a lot of quality riffs, orchestral elements and, yet again, great vocals.

'City Of Heroes' is an excellent piece of music through and through. One more fact that needs to be highlighted is the absolutely phenomenal production by Jacob Hansen (Volbeat Amaranthe, PF, Pretty Maids, Doro). This pristine sound contributes massively to the already great tracks. It's a bit like diamond cutting... having carved out the most beautiful characteristics of every single track and the skills contributed, the entire record is now shining like a unique musical diamond.

Julia Braun

GLOOMBALL – 'THE QUIET MONSTER' *(SteamhammerlSPV)* HEAVY METAL

A Mannheim-based quintet who, on first glance, you might think don't really belong in a magazine like Fireworks, Gloomball have been steadily building a strong live reputation with the younger end of the Rock and Metal audience since their inception back in 2010. 'The Quiet Monster' is their second album coming as it does some two years after their debut 'The Distance'.

Built around a belligerent battery of riffs and the anarchic growl of front-man Alen Ljubic, their acerbic attack is a real mixture of old and new with elements of everybody from In Flames to Rammstein and Godsmack to Paradise Lost jumping out and stomping all over your senses at every available opportunity. Simplistic and direct one minute, yet expertly wielding the kind of controlled brutality a lot of the better Thrash or more extreme Progressive bands continue to demonstrate the next; much as I wanted to dislike it I have to say that more you listen, the more compelling they become… an enigmatic paradox indeed!

Take 'Straight To Hell' for instance. Those of a pink 'n' fluffy persuasion will likely shit a brick when the marauding riffs kick and claw their way out of the speakers, yet on the chorus there's an undeniably strong melodic sensibility lurking just below the surface that a lot of the modern day Power Metal bands would do well to emulate – think Amaranthe meets Hammerfall. Compare and contrast that with the ethereal melodrama that unfolds insidiously across the often quite harrowing 'All Beauty Dies' – an extreme Gothic Metal offering given a twenty thousand volt jolt across the temples.

I'm not about to pretend that they'll be to all tastes – in fact I'll confidently predict that there'll be a sizeable proportion of readers who are likely to head for the comfort of their Ambrosia collection within the first four bars – but unlike traditional Melodic Rock/AOR which, once again, seems to find itself stuck in a rut, their tangential twist on a contemporary Metal sound actually takes me right back to the primal kind of purity that got me into Rock and Metal in the first place.

So, if you want to expand your musical horizons a little, yet still put strong melodies at the heart of it all, taken a listen to the tempestuous ebb and flow of tracks like 'Sirens (Die Alone)', 'One More Day' and 'Blood Red World'… you may actually be pleasantly surprised!

Even the teenage squatters living in your house will be impressed with this one!

Dave Cockett

GODSIZED – 'HEAVY LIES THE CROWN' *(Metalville)* HEAVY METAL

'Heavy Lies The Crown' is the second full-length album from Andover-based Godsized and it's a powerful mix of melody and accessible vocals and hooks. The riffs pack more muscle than a bodybuilder on steroids and this could have crossed over into much heavier territory if they had chosen a "growling" vocalist. Fortunately for us Melodic Rockers, they have Glen Korner at the mic who has a strong, clean voice.

There's a touch of Black Label Society in terms of heaviness but a Furyon-like union of modern-day power and old-school melody. It has been stated that their debut had some Southern Rock leanings but I don't hear any of those kinds of influences at all on this release. There's a touch of Alter Bridge about Korner's vocals and many of the songs have a story to tell which gives them character. His voice has that modern hand-wringing angst going on.

Many of the tunes are about some form of escape such as 'Never A Better Time', 'Fade' and 'Out Of Fear' which is a tale of a woman abused by her husband who shoots him dead. 'Forgotten Friend' is also a good song with a story of a man who's lost everything. They do mix it up musically to hold your attention for the duration of the record from the catchy Metal "radio-fodder" of 'Saving You' and the slower, Led Zeppelin meets AB of 'Push Against The Tide' through to the darker, menacing chords of 'Web Of Lies'. Both 'Stone Cold Blow To the Head' and the aforementioned '...Fear' take right turns mid-song and lead you down a harder route with the riffs pummelling you into submission.

The production is very good and the rhythm section throughout is robust and recorded well, adding considerably to the power of the record. It's "manly" Metal with melody that doesn't ever err on the side of sugar. Heavy touring should win this band friends right across many Rock genre fan bases. It's a good, solid, "British meat and potato" Modern Metal effort.

Duncan Jamieson

GRINDHOUSE – 'CHAPTER ONE' *(RMB/Cargo)* HARD ROCK

2014 saw the German singer Michael Bormann releasing his 'Love Is Magic – Best Of Ballads' compilation and even though he's quite convincing in his weepy odes to love and heartbreak, his fans have eagerly awaited his Hard Rock rebirth. Now it comes in the form of an album recorded in conjunction with the Italian act Grindhouse, who combine cinematographic inclinations with a Hard Rock sound.

Entitled 'Chapter One', the album explodes with a pounding drum roll as the first track 'After Midnight' begins. It's a modern-day Hard Rock piece with hints of early Guns 'N' Roses and Skid Row, completed by Bormann's characteristic voice. Next is Grindhouse's rendition of the 1983 Disco classic 'Ain't Nobody' (originally done by Rufus & Chaka Khan), the song's

Funky beat replaced with a fierce, pulsating riff and pumping rhythm section. There's a Progressive vibe to the instrumental work in 'The Stunt' and a hook that's unashamedly Jaded Heart-esque, drawing much from aesthetics Bormann got his listeners used to in the early days.

'The Way Out' combines Sleaze Metal-tinted, raw energy with melodic passages, followed up by 'The Enemy' with its mellow, ballad-esque verses heavily contrasted with the intensity of lead guitar work. Similarly intense is 'Nothing Gonna Stop Me', its aggressively chanted choruses adding a raw, live vibe to it. It precedes 'Titty Twister', a song that fills the air with its groovy riffs and Funk-ish rhythm section only to surprise a listener with nifty piano-based interludes and the guitar-laden instrumental coda. This, as well as the next track 'Wild Dusk', combine Hard Rock with distinct Blues and Funk flavours – the vivid, pulsating sound that drives them both leaving no doubt about the album's actual highlights. The closing song 'What A Night' has '...One' going full circle so as to return to the contemporary, gritty Hard Rock sound against the melodic hooks so characteristic of the first few tracks on the record.

There's a fine line between variety and chaos in music, but with '...One', Grindhouse have managed to make the most of the former while avoiding the latter. Their sound is solid and coherent, firmly embedded in modern Hard Rock aesthetics yet a handful of different flavours added to particular tracks that make it anything but repetitive and dull. And, of course, apart from it and the band's technical prowess there's another asset to this line-up – personalized by Bormann himself. 'Chapter One' is the former leader of JH returning to his Hard Rock roots and proving, beyond any doubt, that in this genre he's still a force to be reckoned with. Let's hope 'Chapter Two' will follow soon and that it is as good as its predecessor.

Alexandra Mrozowska

HABU – 'TO THE STARS' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

A new name to me, Progressive trio Habu were obviously passed on to me because their influences were listed as Rush, Dream Theater, Kansas and Marillion, amongst many others. Some of the names mentioned I just don't hear (Loudness and Triumph for instance), but you needn't go any further than Rush for what Habu have to offer; particularly their most Progressive period from 'A Farewell To Kings' to 'Signals', which provide most of the "borrowed" moments. Of course this would all sound ridiculous if the band didn't have the chops to pull it off, but thankfully the three guys from Ipswich – Alex Body (bass, vocals, keys), Andy Clarke (guitars, vocals) and Alex Dunbar (drums & percussion) – have good playing skills, particularly Body whose inventive bass work is sublime throughout.

However, let's not get carried away here. Despite the well-managed time changes and musical dexterity, Habu don't have too many memorable song parts and aren't helped by the lead vocals, which while they're thankfully not trying to emulate Geddy Lee's high-pitched scream, are sadly lacking in emotion and fire. Vocals are shared by Body and Clarke, but the high points are invariably all instrumental, like the 'Spirit Of Radio'-like guitar intro to the frequently evolving 'SR-71', the immediately accessible 'It's Time' and the interesting 'Contact Light' (spot those mid-period Rush-isms!). Similarly 'The Vigil' has catchy bits aplenty and the title track a plethora of different guitar tones and a hint of 'Hemispheres', whilst 'Harvest' and 'Android Warriors' see the band heading in their own unique direction despite lacking strong enough hooks.

The refreshingly old-school sound is another plus point, particularly on the guitar solos where there are no overdubs and you can hear the rhythm section with great clarity. There are odd moments where the home made nature of the recording becomes a bit too apparent, harking back to other Rush-influenced bands like Gaskin, Shiva and (especially!) Limelight, but as a first full studio album, this beautifully packaged release is a pretty promising start.

It's available for just a fiver from their website (www.habu.bandcamp.com) along with a 2013 live album and a free download of their debut EP.

Phil Ashcroft

HARDCORE SUPERSTAR – 'HCSS' *(Gain/Sony)* HARD ROCK

It's more of a privilege than anything to be able to review 'HCSS', the brand new album from Swedish band, Hardcore Superstar. This latest offering, album number ten in a history dating back to 1997, is simply a testament to HS's remarkable creative capacity, their musical spark and flair and their ability to renew themselves and surprise their fans without ever losing their trademark sound.

'HCSS' has been hailed as a return to the band's 1998 sound. 'Don't Mean Shit' doesn't have the heaviness of the later albums and the similar-sounding, 'Party 'Til I'm Gone', makes great use of veiled vocals and contrasting tempo with the guitar; both hark back to the sound of days gone by, think albums 'It's Only Rock 'N' Roll' (1998) and 'Bad Sneakers' (2000). This is no play-safe repeat however. 'The Cemetery' has a 'London Calling'-type beat and Jocke Berg's ability to turn on the swagger through just his vocals adds a whole lot of style. His skill as a front-man is not just in his ridiculously entertaining live performances; 'Off With Their Heads' shows the confidence and depth his vocals have in his particularly unique, guttural sound.

'Fly' opens with a very live-like raw sound. The track takes on a much more of a Doors-style than you might be expecting, diverse in tonality and texture. Seven minute tracks are usually reserved for overblown ballads but for HS it's a chance to knock out some deep bass riffs and Uriah Heep-esque bursts of chorus. 'The Ocean' is where we get the Sleazier sound of HS, so synonymous with the later albums. Berg again shows great style in turning teasing, almost mocking. 'Touch The Sky' practically pulses with beat and effective backing vocals; this is the anthemic song with a head-banging riff if you were looking for one.

It's not a flawless album; some of the songs are less distinct, most notably 'Glue' and the bold 'Messed Up For Sure'. The rewind-effect on the final track seemed out of place but it does, at least, relate to the overall circular theme of returning to the 1998 sound. The absence of a true ballad is notable, but not to any serious negative effect.

It would be hard for any reviewer not to compare 'HCSS' to the nine albums that precede it; they are, after all, all commendable in some way. 'HCSS' doesn't feel like a landmark album but it merely makes HS's job of choosing a set-list for the upcoming tour harder because there are songs here that deserve a place. The real success of Hardcore Superstar is in creating yet another album, rammed with musical talent, which their fans will love.

Sophie Brownlee

HOPE TO FIND – 'OUR STORY ABOUT YOU' *(Mireille Music)* PROGRESSIVE

Hope To Find are a Progressive Metal quintet hailing from Turkey, yes you read that correctly, Turkey! Formed in 2003, the band released an EP six years ago and supported Polish Proggers Riverside a year later. However, just as things were looking up for them, their drummer and bassist left and it took them another three years to be in a position to record their debut album.

According to the accompanying blurb 'Our Story About You' is a concept story about our daily lives and how we deal with moments of conflict. Guitarist Zafer Yuksel produced the album which was recorded in 2013.

Opening track 'Exile' is an instrumental with drum loops and synths. A crashing guitar ushers in 'Suddenly' and keyboardist Alper Dagalp surprises us with his use of accordion; the song slowly builds up and ends at a frenetic pace with some extremely heavy riffing. Next up is 'Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow' which again starts off slowly with some moody guitar and piano and then two minutes in, it really kicks off with some powerful drumming from Yavuz Sozkan and crunchy guitar from Yuksel.

'Gently Broken' is another that starts off slowly with some Jazzy bass and excellent vocals from Mert Erdem, initially I wasn't convinced by his singing but his voice does grow on you. This track also gets much heavier half way in. Contrastingly, 'Through The Window' is a one minute number played on the xylophone and sounds like a musical box. 'Instructional Inspirations' begins with more Jazzy bass lines from Koray Ergunay before a John Petrucci-style monstrous riff takes over complimented by piano and synth and again midway it changes style with Erdem singing over a gentle acoustic guitar.

'Kaleidoscope' is more of an up-tempo number which goes against the style of the rest of the album. It is a very catchy number with synths and infectious guitar and ending with a Jazzy bass solo. 'Worth To Remember' is classic Progressive Metal and even includes a couple of seconds of "growling" which actually fits within the track. 'Memories' clocks in at under two minutes and is an acoustic piece and leads nicely into the tenth and final track 'Alienation' which, surprise-surprise, begins slowly with acoustic guitar and piano and synth and finally after six minutes Yuksel treats us to Metallic riffing of the highest order.

'Our Story About You' is a promising debut, apparently the band are already working on a follow up. With a stronger production we could be in for a treat.

Az Chaudhry

HOT MAMA – 'RE-EARTH' *(Fastball)* HEAVY METAL

It's two years since I reviewed Hot Mama's debut album 'Downloader', the basis of which was promising, but with a bit of work still to do. So with 'Re-Earth' about to appear from this Dresden-based German/Russian quartet, it's interesting to see how things may have changed. Style wise, they still have a hard, heavy Alternative Rock style that is built around some intense, distorted riffing and the powerful vocals of Sonya Red.

Opener 'Watch Out' sets the standard right from the start with soaring vocals and some edgy Metallic riffs from guitarist Stasy, a theme that defines the whole album in truth. 'We've Had Our Share' and 'Let It Die' follow on strongly, the latter in particular is a stand out track and one of four songs that also appeared on last year's EP of that name. The band has certainly moved on since that debut album, Red's vocals sound stronger and have a greater tone and depth, helped enormously no doubt by a stronger production and overall sound to the album.

There's a much more Progressive feel to their songs too, managing to incorporate time changes and some almost staccato beats to their music without breaking the overall flow. Bizarrely perhaps, but the style keeps reminding me of early Rush, with the Metallic rhythms and changes that they included in many of their formative works, up to 'XYY' which has its

MAGNUM – 'ESCAPE FROM THE SHADOW GARDEN LIVE 2014' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* ROCK

Having seen Magnum on this tour several times, two of the shows having been reviewed in previous issues, it would be easy to write a glowing album review with just a cursory listen, the set-list being fairly consistent throughout the tour. But then again, having seen firsthand how good Magnum were on stage, this album has got a lot to live up to in capturing a sound and performance that do the band justice.

Kicking off with the latest album's opening track, 'Live 'Til You Die' instantly has the classic Magnum beat to it. For anyone who has seen the band live, it's easy to conjure up the image of Bob Catley, arms pumping to the rhythm with the crowd clapping along right from the start. The set can almost be split into distinct sections, the next few tracks showcasing a few heavier tracks including 'Freedom Day' and 'Dance Of The Black Tattoo', still plenty of harmonies in there but proving they're not just melodic lightweights.

Despite being recorded over a number of dates, the transition from song to song is seamless, even as the pace changes for my own favourite section of the album. Despite being recorded nearly thirty years apart 'Unwritten Sacrifice' and 'Les Morts Dansant' are linked by their lyrical and emotional portrayal of the futility and tragedies of The Great War. Not the standard fare of most Rock bands, but then Tony Clarkin has never followed the clichéd lyrical routes. Sandwiched between the two is 'How Far Jerusalem', another stalwart in the live show, and one that treats us to an extended Bluesy solo from Clarkin. Catley's vocals may have matured over the years but he still holds the tone and passion to bring Clarkin's word to life.

Another newie, 'Falling For The Big Plan', brings the tempo back up for the closing stretch of 'All England's Eyes', 'Vigilante' and 'Kingdom Of Madness'; all of which get the audience bouncing and singing along to a triumphant finish. As a fan who'll always want more, I would have loved to have heard the encores too; 'The Spirit', 'Sacred Hour', 'Too Many Clowns' along with 'On Christmas Day' from the winter dates.

There's been many classic live albums over the years, 'Strangers In The Night', 'Live And Dangerous', 'Life After Death' and whilst, in today's markets, it may not reach those heights, what it does have in common is that it captures a band performing at their peak. Produced by the band themselves, the sound shows the confidence of simply enjoying what they do best. An essential souvenir for all those who saw the gigs and a classy showcase of the band for those that didn't.

Ian Parry

counterpart in the instrumental 'Cyberdome' here. 'Valley Of Laughter' and 'UnHollywood' are other highlights, but if there is a downside to the progression in the band over the last few years it would have to be in the song-writing. Hot Mama have certainly defined their style with this release, but at times the tracks just seem too similar to stand out in their own right with a lack of consistency also in there.

The band have certainly made huge progress from their debut album and certainly well worth checking out if you like a heavy, Metallic yet Progressive feel to your music. The band seems to have got their act together more than before but have not yet nailed the songs they need if looking to move to the next level; improving certainly, but still a work in progress.

Ian Parry

IMPELLITTERI – 'VENOM' *(Frontiers)* HEAVY METAL

The collaboration between guitarist Chris Impellitteri and renowned vocalist Rob Rock goes way back to Impellitteri's debut EP in 1987, and whilst the band's biggest success came with the more commercial Graham Bonnet-fronted 'Stand In Line' the following year – one of two brief tenures in the band by the ex-Rainbow & Alcatrazz singer – it's Rock that's the longest-standing and most perfect foil for Impellitteri's brand of Speed Metal. To be honest, the frenetic guitar and drums became more than a bit overused over the next few albums and the band fell off my radar somewhere around 1997's 'Eye Of The Hurricane'. But a recent re-appraisal of the excellent 'Answer To The Master' and their last release 'Wicked Maiden' was enough to make me curious about 'Venom', their tenth studio album and their first for six years.

Impellitteri, Rock and long-standing bassist James Amelio Pulli are joined here by the much-travelled John Dette, a man who's occupied the drum-stool for no less than Iced Earth, Slayer, Anthrax and Testament, so that should give you a good idea of what was required of him here. He doesn't disappoint either as the band rip through 'Domino Theory', 'Jehova' and the title track in a blur of double-bass drums, lightning riffs, bee-in-a-bottle solos and high octane vocals, but also slow it down slightly on the thumping 'Face The Enemy', mix-up the tempos of 'Nightmare' and even insert Iron Maiden-approved melodies into 'Time Machine'.

If it was the same all the way through it would get boring, so thankfully Rock pulls out melodic choruses with harmony vocals on the catchy 'Empire Of Lies' and 'We Own The Night', whilst the infectious riffs and lively rhythm section lift the superb 'Rise' and the chunky and eminently listenable closer 'Holding On' to greater heights. The musicianship is jaw-dropping throughout and the album can be enjoyed solely on that level if you want, but Rock does enough to bring melody to the fore and make things listenable between some ridiculously fast but highly-skilled Impellitteri riffs and solos.

Produced by the band themselves, the sound is clean and punchy with none of the down-tuned Grunginess of Modern Metal, and whilst some may find the guitar solos to be a little shrill and tinny, it must be hard to avoid that when you're playing with such speed and fluidity. My main surprise with 'Venom' is that it's released by Italian Melodic Rock label Frontiers Records; I hope it doesn't miss its target Metal audience simply because of that.

Phil Ashcroft

INCREST – 'RUBICON ATLAS' *(Gateway)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Originally this band was called InCreast and they have been around since 2003. It was their mission to keep Grunge Rock alive but then came 2006; the band went through a new line-up change with bassist Anders Olsen joining the band and a name change to InCrest along with a sound they could call their own.

'Rubicon Atlas' is their latest release encompassing the nature of Seattle Grunge but with a modern Alternative flavour of Rock. There are inspirations of Nirvana and Soundgarden to bring that old-school Grunge sound, it is evident vocally and through the structure of the songs.

Opening track 'In The Wild' sets off the album nicely, really gaining a feel of what the band are about and the potential of the album; it sets forth the Alternative tone of their sound. Where you think Alternative encompasses a Punk Rock element, this actually surrounds a real Indie Rock texture in the guitar tone with sharp chord sequences.

'Even Through' is the very heartbeat of the Grunge genre; structurally and melody there is a strong spirit of Nirvana in the body of the track. Now 'Singular Sequence' is a complex and well-structured track. The rhythm sections almost have this down-tuned Funk feel to the instrumental finish; it really gives their album a different shade and great texture.

'Pistology' throws a spanner into the works; the track features vocalist Julie Krogsboll, acoustic guitar and strings. The mood and tone completely shift with this one and there is a strong European feel to the composition, excellent harmonies and clean guitar chords that create a thought provoking atmosphere. With great dynamics that shift the focus between vocals and guitar, this is a song you would not expect to find on this album.

'The Golden' is a complete opposite of what was just played. The Heavy Metal element really kicks in and is highly prominent; here is where you can start really enjoying the album and really getting into the InCrest sound. 'The Golden Part 2' is a definite let down for a finish. '…Golden' is most certainly one of the best tracks, it finishes on such a high that you are awaiting for '…Part 2' to explode from the musical build up, but it falls flat and seems like it is a completely different track; it is hard to find the connection between the two songs.

There is an excellent raw sound to InCrest and their album, yet it is an album you can appreciate and enjoy.

Lara Kisel

JACE PAWLAK – 'PERSPECTIVE' *(Independent)* ROCK

Singer/song-writer Jace Pawlak may not be a name that is instantly familiar to most; but fans of bands like Tango Down ('Too Many Roads', 'Back To Life', 'Corners Of My Mind', 'Alone'), Goodbye Thrill ('Let Me Sleep') and Far Cry ('Fine Line', 'Have It All') will have heard several of his songs. I have had the privilege of chatting to Jace Pawlak over the years, via Facebook, and we share very similar tastes in music. However, that is where the similarities end, as Jace Pawlak is a very talented musician who has the ability of writing very catchy tunes. I, on the other hand, can merely write about his talents.

This is certainly a family affair with his father, Dennis Pawlak, and younger brother, Trevor Pawlak, handling the electric guitars, leaving Jace Pawlak just the vocals, keyboards, acoustic guitar, bass, drums, production and mixing duties.

Jace Pawlak decided to go down the Kickstarter Campaign route to finance this album and must have been delighted by the positive response he got from his ever-growing fan-base. The one thing that prevails throughout 'Perspective' is the melody, whether it be straight-ahead Melodic Rock, acoustic-based songs or piano ballads.

The album kicks off with the ultra-catchy Melodic Rock of 'Cry'; many an AOR band would die for a killer opener like this on their album. The style changes with 'While We're Here' which has an Americana vibe. The first of four ballads is 'What If We Were Wrong', another of Jace Pawlak's heroes, Richard Marx, would have been proud to write and record this one. 'Don't Talk To Me', co-written with Chris "Luppy" Swan, is an ode to one of our mutual favourite bands, Toto. 'The Unknown' is a real tear-jerking, piano ballad reminiscent of Bonnie Raitt's classic 'I Can't Make You Love Me' and surely destined to be a future classic and a song that is difficult to listen to without getting a lump in your throat. 'Jodi's Just Running' and the third ballad 'We Don't Know Anything' are songs you could imagine another of Jace Pawlak's idols, Billy Joel, writing and recording. My personal favourite is the AOR gem 'Renegade Heart', co-written with John Kivel, and brings to mind Canadian singer/song-writer Stan Meissner. Those whom are familiar with FC's 'High Gear' album will recognise the brilliant 'The Same Mistake' that appears on this album as a stripped-down acoustic version. The album concludes with the beautiful ballad 'Little Star'.

Jace Pawlak wanted to highlight his song-writing talents and that he certainly has achieved, in spades, on 'Perspective'. If Ed Sheeran can headline three nights at Wembley Stadium, then Jace Pawlak should prepare himself for a year-long residency at the Hollywood Bowl.

Mark Donnelly

MARCEL SINGOR – 'FUTUREPROOF' *(Independent)* MELODIC ROCK

I put on this album from Dutchman Marcel Singor and immediately thought of classic Prince and The Dan Reed Network. Sure enough, the press release agrees with the Prince analogy but please keep the DR one in mind as well. As a result, there are Funky songs galore with outlandish guitar solos (in the vein of Steve Vai) – what's not to like?

Singor, ever since winning the Dutch National Guitar Awards at the age of thirteen, has been a household name in the Dutch world of virtuoso lead guitar and has been recording with different bands and various others since the 1980s – but this is his first solo album. As a natural consequence, this is a very mature debut and he has thrown everything including the kitchen sink into the effort.

Opener 'Authority' has "classic" written all over it with a relentless groove, insane guitar and synths coming out of everywhere. Singor has a commercial Reed-esque voice and he also delivers the aforementioned masterful guitar solos. The tracks on the whole are mid-tempo-based with a driving drumbeat and are very much of a 1980's vibe; 'Let's Not Talk' and 'Flash' are Dance/Rock/Funk and emphasis the point that this album needs to be turned up loud.

Producer Bas Bron has lent his synth-heavy approach to this album and it combines with Singor's vocals and guitar work perfectly. Alongside the Funk, the ballads work well with Singor's voice coming to the fore in tracks such as 'Colour My Time'.

'Futureproof' is a fantastic, good-time, upbeat album and if released in a different decade would be a massive album; connoisseurs of good music should make a beeline for this.

Rob McKenzie

JETTBLACK – 'DISGUISES' *(Cherry Red)* HARD ROCK

Jettblack's fourth album, 'Disguises' sees them mature and get a little edgier. The band could have gone one of two ways; returned to the Stadium Rock style of previous albums, or developed on from their 2013's 'Black Gold' with something heavier and a little different to what they've done before. Gone are the obviously anthemic riffs of their debut and sophomore albums, to be replaced by groove-driven songs and heavier guitar parts.

'Slaves' drops you in at the deep end of this new, almost dark edge that the Bucks-based Rockers are going for. 'Explode' captures the element of experimentation with an A Cappella opening backed by clapping. The middle tracks of the album like 'Poison Rain', the title track and 'Broken Bones' are not without their good points but aren't strong and aren't particularly catchy.

'Black And White' is more toned down but the guitar has a beautiful, haunting melody. Sometimes it feels like the vocals are searching for a note rather than hitting and manipulating them. 'Kick In The Teeth' brings back the pace, giving the album a bit more direction. The driving riffs feel more like the 'Get Your Hands Dirty'-era Jettblack (from 2010) and they still do it so well. Sometimes there's a feeling that the album lacks a certain emotion and electricity, almost as if the band are holding back or not loose and really into the song. 'Enemy' is more emotive and more of this same passion and energy would have been a boost to the album. The playing with the rhythm throughout only generates more interest and the strong beat is great for thudding along to.

There's no let up from here. 'Human' is straight in with a kicking beat and a solid, heavy riff you can really get into. The high-toned guitar over the bass is positively Sixx:A.M.-esque. The vocals are possibly the only let-down; they tend to take on a similar vein in each song, contrasting a low, clear sound with a higher, screechy tone. In the higher register, they often lose the melody so end up sounding the same. Not always, but you get the idea.

An interesting album and not what I expected. Jettblack seem to have gone a little out on the limb and come out more definitive in places, heavier in others, not so catchy sometimes and with a new dose of attitude elsewhere. All slammed together though, and in the midst of Jettblack's fairly well-scoring discography, it all comes out as somewhat mediocre.

Sophie Brownlee

JOYFOCUS – 'RANDOM ACCESS DIGITAL AUDIO HERESY' *(Atomic Monster Productions)* MELODIC ROCK

JoyFocus has released a simple but effective album entitled 'Random Access Digital Audio Heresy' showcasing the vocal talents of Holly Joy and the multi-instrumentalist Rikk Currence; song-writing, production and art design are also handled by the talented Currence.

The Joy/Currence duo approach gives an intimate feel to proceedings; being Pop-based

Melodic Rock, it doesn't detract if at least some of the drums are programmed (that's my opinion, apologies if they are indeed organic!). The layered approach of Currence's keyboards and guitars complements Joy's vocals which are commercial with a slight Country vibe to them.

As for the songs in '...Heresy', the mid-tempo 'Gone' is a catchy "radio-friendly" song with a strong chorus and a good all round stomp to proceedings. The power ballad is the sweet spot for JoyFocus and the rousing 'Words' has a top-drawer chorus to it and all the ingredients of a great song including an interesting guitar solo. The highlight for me is the album closer 'Home' with it narrative verse, orchestral keyboard backing and slow build up to its triumphant chorus.

Overall, I would say the vocals and general song structures in 'Random Access Digital Audio Heresy' are in the envelope of Pat Benatar and that's high praise indeed. A solid album full of Melodic Rock with a few twists and turns.

Rob McKenzie

JPL – 'MMXIV' *(Quadrifonic)* — PROGRESSIVE

Not content with being a driving force behind eclectic, always interesting and soon to be no more French Proggers Nemo and the "sometimes heavy, sometimes Proggy" Wolfspring, Jean Pierre Louveton delivers solo album number five, 'MMXIV', under the name JPL. Already renowned for his guitar work, Louveton somehow manages to highlight that aspect even more acutely in this solo guise, while keeping both eyes firmly fixed on the goal of making sure the six-string serves the song. It's a smart starting point and one utilised through eight tracks which sometimes meander and on other occasions positively romp, leaving a remarkably cohesive trail of eclecticism in their wake.

Louveton not only provides all of the energetic guitar excursions, he also handles everything in earshot with the exception of a few lead vocal slots and the keyboards to the song 'Superhero'. The latter aspect is provided by his Nemo band-mate Guillaume Fontaine, while Dominique Leonetti of Lazuli provides some of the singing on 'Le Dernier Souffle De Vent' and 'L'un Contre L'autre. 25 Yard Screamer's Nicholas James does likewise on 'Lifelines' and 'Superhero'. Add to that spoken word sections on 'Mad Science' from Terry Cooper and what might be seen by some as a weakness on this album, namely Louveton's native tongue vocals, are augmented to such an extent that they actually help to give an album that is part sung in French and part sung in English even more character.

What the songs also contain is individual identity and while the album is conceptually based round man's basic stupidity and inability to exist without war, poverty, power and division, each track takes its own very distinct path. Louveton's guitar always drives the themes to their conclusions, yet intricate beats, pulsating keyboards and the ever changing vocals often catch the imagination, allowing everything to steer well clear of Prog's almost ever present hallmarks, while still firmly falling somewhere between Traditional, Neo and Metal Progressive territories.

If you've encountered Nemo or Wolfspring, then the casual classiness of what this album provides won't be a shock. However, if this is your first outing with JPL then the forceful yet, at times, reserved nature in which it is presented may be; but then we all like a good surprise, don't we? 'MMXIV' is just that and so much more!

Steven Reid

KINESIS 4 – 'SATYAGRAHA' *(Independent)* — ROCK

There are very few true polymaths and when we see one who may fit the bill, we seem to circle warily; note the recent Observer Newspaper interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, the curator of the Serpentine Gallery which mentions all he does, seems to take a view on the three books he currently has on his slate and wonders when he finds time to sleep.

And that's not surprising; there is such keenness, in this "why aren't you a cordon blue chef in your spare time?" world, to over provide. And that's what we have here; Kinesis 4 show their influences by ranging quite far and wide, but perhaps should have completed one song before moving into another.

Opening with gentle Country Rock ('Come With Me') and then mainlining a 1970's Arena Rock vibe, a little Montrose here ('The Word Is Out'), a little Thin Lizzy there ('City Girl') but nothing really sticking. Very nice when they wheel in the electric Joanna and attend a Quireboys master-class; 'Feel Alright' has a lovely ragged appeal with a wide open solo and closer 'The Enlightened' shrugs off a 'Going For The One' organ to find itself in soft Country Rock.

This is effectively Southern styling, the kind that is in the ascendance now, whether from the Rockier Blackberry Smoke or the caress of Gin Lady. It was a time when artists could give us this softness in an arena setting – look at the Eagles. However, they possessed supremely gifted song-writers and classic songs; these just seem too basic to make us sit up, eclectic as they may be.

As the wonderful XTC said "don't change your focus in the hope of getting one".

Steve Swift

KNOCK OUT KAINE – 'RISE OF THE ELECTRIC JESTER' *(Rocksector)* — ROCK

Since the release of 'House Of Sins', Knock Out Kaine have jumped to the lovely people at Rocksector which can only be a good move for them both. It's somewhat difficult to define KOK, their sound is without doubt British but they also have the groove of Buckcherry and some of the sass of Steel Panther, all delivered with verve and panache.

Opening with '16 Grams Of Heart Attack' it's a smack round the chops to get your attention from the off, a thunderous song driven along by Dean Foxx's distinctive growl and some hard driving guitar, no self-indulgent noodling from Jimmy Bohemian, now or ever. 'Fire And Smoke' unquestionably has the trademark KOK wall of sound. The Celtic beginning of 'How Would I Know' trips into an upbeat ditty that is a steering-wheel tapper if ever there was one, the rhythm section of Danny Krash and Lee Byrne never let up and power the album along.

'...Jester' is beautifully mastered and the rich layers of sound belie the fact there are only four members of the band so fat is the production; this can be heard to perfection on 'Diamond Blue', a lovely sliver of Bluesy Rock. I love the vocal device of imitating the chimes of Norwich Cathedral in 'Cascading'; it's a lovely little hook that gives a touch of class.

'Ain't Your Kind' is a nice Heavy Rocker with chunky bass rhythms, overlaid with soaring guitar. The quirky joyfulness of 'Boxes' show lyrically KOK have an intellectuality that could be easily overlooked in the enjoyment of the fun. 'Flying Blind' is another pacey Rocker. No album is complete without a 'ballad' and 'Because You Were There' is a ballad as only KOK do them; the feeling is heartfelt and the guitar solo has genuine emotion and soul. The aptly named 'One More For The Road' is an uplifting album closer, anthemic and choral, just right for a satisfied crowd to come in big at the end of the evening before heading out into the night.

Knock Out Kaine are a class act and 'Rise Of The Electric Jester' is another mile on the road to the recognition and the respect they surely deserve. The move to Rocksector has been marked by an album that it quintessentially British (a tag they embrace, you can't argue with a video featuring a Vulcan bomber AND Bruce Dickinson), it is uplifting and joyous but has an underlying intelligent maturity that will give it longevity. I think I'm going to pour myself a large glass of red wine, sit back and watch their progress from here on in with great interest because I'm predicting great things for them.

Helen Bradley Owers

NELSON – 'PEACE OUT' *(Frontiers)* — MELODIC ROCK

It's amazing to think that it is now twenty-five years since the Nelson brothers, Gunnar and Matthew, released the seminal 'After The Rain'. Where does the time go? It was even more amazing for me to find this album sitting in my reviews box because I didn't even know that it was coming out. But as soon as I saw it, my fingers itched to play it so in to the death deck it went and it's been there ever since. Why? Well because it's just a wonderful slab of Melodic AOR with enough hooks to hang every picture in an art gallery.

As the twelve tracks unfold, you instantly bond with the harmonies and melodies that abound throughout each and every song that makes up 'Peace Out'. They are all so memorable that after only a couple of plays you'll have them ingrained in your mind and you'll soon be singing along to them in full voice. Don't worry though because this isn't to say that this album is an instant fix with little depth. The depth is in the quality of the song-writing, which keeps you coming back for more, each time the album has finished spinning.

As for stand out songs, let me start off by highlighting the totally brilliant 'Invincible', with its catchy riffs, glorious harmony vocals and killer hook. This one song is what Melodic Rock is all about and it's the type of track you should blast out whilst driving a convertible car with its roof down on a hot summer day. There is also 'Bad For You', with a melody so totally addictive that like a drug you have to have your fix of it on a daily basis, and the stonkingly good ' Let It Ride' which has another chorus to die for; these three songs are worth the price of this release all on their own. However, Nelson just keep going and hitting those musical high spots, with the likes of 'Rockstar', 'What's Not To Love' and the Bluesy, Soul-filled 'Leave The Light On For Me' proving they can do no wrong on this album.

2015 has seen a fantastic start to the year with some superb AOR/Melodic Rock albums being released. With 'Peace Out', Nelson have easily joined those great albums and come the end of the year, this release will potentially be in many a Top Ten, have no fear of that; definitely an essential purchase.

Ian Johnson

KORPIKLAANI – 'NOITA' *(Nuclear Blast)* — HEAVY METAL

The three years that have passed since 'Manala' represents the biggest gap in the recording career of Finnish Folk Metallers Korpiklaani, while being the first release featuring new accordion player Sami Perttula.

Although only lead singer/guitarist Jonne Jarvela remains from the 2003 debut 'Spirit Of The Forest', 'Noita' continues and develops further their unique style of Metal. The addition of Perttula and the increased role of violinist Tuomas Rounakari really bring the music to life. In fact Rounakari's violin often steps up and takes the place of the lead guitar and the album works all the better for it.

On first listen to the uninitiated, there may be a furrowed brow or two and a scratched head but repeated listens soon reveals something rather enjoyable. Jarvela's somewhat gruff vocals while singing in his native tongue, together with the up-tempo, riotous, hard-hitting Folk, turns from baffling to utterly addictive in a short space of time.

Opener 'Viinamaen Mies' is a real stomper and is absolutely guaranteed to get you off your backside and up onto your feet while the "We Will Rock You" tribal drums and soaring chorus of 'Lempo' will have you clapping and singing along in no time.

Listening to 'Jouni Jouni' leaves a nagging feeling of something familiar until it hits you that it's a rather unique take on Tommy James And The Shondells' 'Mony Mony' which was also covered by Billy Idol, who did a more faithful rendition of the original.

Although 'Noita' literally means "witch", the band are keen to explain away the negative connotations preferring to explain it as someone who has a wider understanding of nature, rather like a Native American Medicine Man or Shaman. Whatever the meaning, the music feels vibrant and uplifting and as far from dark and negative as you could hope to get.

Although the album feels fairly short at ten songs and around forty minutes of music, this does actually enhance the listening experience. There's no fat or flab to get in the way and no cramming in songs for the sake of it. Just ten rabble-rousing, dance-inducing slabs of Finnish Folk Metal that are rather a lot of fun and just a bit different to the everything else out there at the moment.

Mick Burgess

KYLE GASS BAND – 'KYLE GASS BAND' *(SteamhammerSPV)* — ROCK

The "super-group" that is the Kyle Gass Band are releasing their debut album. To describe the album simply, it's Classic Rock at its finest. Well we wouldn't expect anything less from Gass and his super-mates. Now the question on everyone's mind is – does this sound like Tenacious D and a TD album?

'Man Child' is an absolute ear pleaser with its chunky groove and the more than satisfying licks that hook you right in. There is no running from that TD humour as it perspires through their lyrics. 'Dying Day' carries through that propulsive groove; it is your American Dirty Rock but still a feel good classic.

Gass' known talent on acoustic guitar aluminates on 'Bro Ho'; his incredible flair for

song-writing and an effortless solo, making an excellent feature to this easy and pleasing track, which also brings a slightly cheeky touch.

'Tremendous' could be from a TD album for sure. It takes you on that movie type journey, lyrically and musically, as it builds to a hero finish with a balls-out, fire blazing solo. What really give this album an edge is the harmonica and flute in 'Road Chops' and 'Questionable'. '...Chops' is a track you can really sink your teeth into with the real dirty guitar tone and energetic harmonica solo.

Reverting back to the original question... it does feel like a TD album but there is a difference, there is pounding heartbeat of Rock 'n' Roll. It is refreshing to hear Gass and John Konesky showcase their song-writing skills in alternative light. However, it would not be difficult to picture this album in a movie feature or another TD film. The question that still needs to be asked and yet to be answered is – is he writing songs for himself or is he writing for the Tenacious D crowd?

Lara Kisel

KYRBGRINDER – 'CHRONICLES OF A DARK MACHINE' *(Cherry Red)* PROGRESSIVE

Kyrbgrinder are a three-piece band from London playing a powerful, heavily drum-focused style of Metal. The elements are all there but somehow they just don't come together in their latest album 'Chronicles Of A Dark Machine'.

'Slipping Away' introduces you to the bludgeoning riffs from guitarist Aaron Waddingham, though he's entirely capable of a complex solo or two, notably in 'Egocentric Suicide'. Johanne James is a terrifically energetic and persistent drummer but as a vocalist he often seems shy of a melody that really connects to the song. As the Funky, offset rhythm of 'Oxygen' shows, this album is more about instrumentation and production than something you're going to sing or dance along to.

The production is very clean with each texture and sound audible, which is impressive given the ridiculously diverse array of sounds. The acoustic section in 'Oxygen' is just a flavour of the different directions that Kyrbgrinder's songs can suddenly veer off to; while interesting, it doesn't always work to make distinct, stand-alone songs.

'I Know Why' has a strangely light-hearted tone compared to the rest of the stormy album. 'I Feel Blue' is pretty self-explanatory with a dragging beat and by this point, the album is begging for a bit more variety, especially as more and more instrumental paths are taken in the latter half of the of the songs.

'Take Your Soul Away' has a more roughed-up, fractured rhythm and is catchier overall. The backing vocals taking a more central role in the chorus help to fill out the vocals too. This track contains all Kyrbgrinder's best qualities and they actually complement each other fairly well. The title track is a soft, ghoulish guitar melody; potentially could have worked great in a song but at only a minute and a half, we'll never know.

Overall, there's a brand of Metal in there that could potentially be popular and successful as it has stormy energy and some great musicianship. Unfortunately, the album as a whole is rather monotonous.

Sophie Brownlee

KYSHERA – 'CIRCLE' *(Konic)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Three-piece Modern Rock outfit Kyshera have been knocking about for a while now and 'Circle' is their third album. I did find their previous album a little bit hard going if I'm honest but 'Circle' is vastly superior in many ways. Kyshera are really hard to pigeonhole and comparing them to other bands is nigh on impossible because the list would be so long and varied it would most likely confuse anyone reading. They literally throw everything but – no – everything including the kitchen sink into the mix; 'Behind These Lies' even includes heavy use of Bongos and that's only one example of the band's eclectic nature.

Having listened to 'Circle, I'm not totally sure as yet whether it's a work of absolute genius or actually a bunch of weird, discombobulating nonsense. The album can be a mixed bag which is mainly due to the very varied influences and originality shown in the bands song-writing; it's something that can make some tracks harder to digest than others. It's a very dark and grimy album at times which is at total odds with some of the Funky bass-heavy moments. I think the mixture of Alt Rock vibes here will make these guys appeal to fans of that genre, as it is a little bit different.

I don't think this album is for mainstream consumption and to be honest I don't think that's what Kyshera were aiming for; obviously they want people to hop onboard the Kyshera crazy train but not by compromising their sound to make themselves Pop-based and "radio friendly".

Anyone who knows my tastes will not be surprised that the two tracks that make the deepest impression on me are the most commercial sounding selections. These tracks actually have a distinct contrast from the rest of the album as they have quite a brightness to them and feel more polished than the grittiness shown elsewhere. Ballad 'Gone' is a real stand out number and is the sort of song that if it was picked up by mainstream radio could make them overnight sensations, but it is definitely not representative of the whole album. 'The Wrong Size' is as about as close as Kyshera get to being "radio friendly" and it's by far the most upbeat song on 'Circle' with a real happy go lucky feel. It's one that really appeals to me and contains some great vocal "wooahh" hooks that make it really memorable.

Given the many clashes and mixing of styles and influences, 'Circle' can be very messy and disorientating, but oddly that's exactly what make's Kyshera so intriguing. If you're looking for something a little bit different, this album could be just what you're looking for!

Paul Woodward

PETERIK/SCHERER – 'RISK EVERYTHING' *(Frontiers)* AOR

What is it about the music of the "legend" known as Jim Peterik that makes you smile, makes you feel happy and makes you feel joy as you listen to his songs? I'm not sure, but whatever it is, if Peterik could bottle it and the human race (which at this moment in time needs it) could take a full dose, then maybe a lot of our problems would go away. For want of a better word he's a genius when it comes to writing hook-filled, emotional and heartfelt songs, of this there can be no argument… it's just a fact.

His songs have touched many hearts across the years and everyone who reads this magazine could, and should, be able to name at least a couple of them with no difficulty at all. Now he is back to entertain and enthrall us all once again with a set of eleven new songs that I (personally) think are some of the best he has written in quite a few years. The album is part Survivor, part Pride Of Lions, part AOR and part Melodic Rock; in summary, it's bloody catchy as hell.

Peterik also has a new partner in crime in the shape of Marc Scherer. Before this album, Scherer was a much in demand backing singer and had worked with Peterik on the POL albums and this is, surprisingly, his first time singing lead vocals on an album. He's a man blessed with a voice slightly reminiscent of Toby Hitchcock mixed with a little Fergie Frederiksen but with his own strong personal identity stamped on each and every line he sings. He really is a find and hopefully we'll be hearing a lot more from him from now on.

Simply hit the play button and let that warmth, emotion and passion that Peterik put into every one of these songs wash over you. As soon as the title track begins, you'll immediately feel that smile I spoke of spreading across your face. Then for the next forty minutes or so, as 'Chance Of A Lifetime', the pure Survivorness of 'Desperate In Love', 'How Long Is A Moment', the wonderful Rocking 'Brand New Heart' (with its superb Mike Aquino solo), 'Milestones' and 'Your Independence Day' play, you will find that, for a while at least, your cares and worries have been forgotten.

'Risk Everything' is everything I love about AOR; passionate songs written, sung and played by a group of musicians who really know and love what they are doing. If you're a lover of the genre or just of great music, then you must, by hook or crook, get yourself a copy of this fabulous album.

Ian Johnson

LACEY – 'UNDER THE BRIGHTEST LIGHTS' *(Big Cartel)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Nottingham Pop Rock newbies Lacey – they took their name from Brand New's Jesse Lacey – formed from the ashes of Art Rockers Erica Black. But that really shouldn't put you off as the latest incarnation is far more accessible, amicably blending chiming guitar with shiny Pop hooks.

This first full-length album follows two extended players and a support slot with James Blunt when he last played the Nottingham Arena. Lacey has remained something of a local secret until now where surely this classy debut will see them move onto to better things.

The urgency of the U2-inspired first single 'Tonight' or the instant goodtime feel of 'The Last Time' should pique your interest, especially if you've a penchant for Pop Rock in the vein of Green River Ordinance or Wakefield's Euphoria Audio.

If your tastes extend to the Brit Rock of Don Broco or Lower Than Atlantis then the feel of 'All Too Far' or 'Reach Out', although a little more gentile, should appeal although there's a strong case for sticking to the formula of these aforementioned songs rather than the fillers evident at the end of the album, namely 'Wait Till Tomorrow' and 'Older'.

If they can pen songs in this overall vein then the follow-up album should be something quite special; certainly one to watch.

Mike Newdeck

LANCER – 'SECOND STORM' *(Despotz)* HEAVY METAL

The cover artwork of Lancer's self-titled debut depicted a futuristic ostrich shooting laser beams out of its eyes. Now, with their second album, it's the same ostrich trampling down the remains of its defeated "robo-enemies". This young Metal band from Sweden have returned with this sophomore effort, 'Second Storm', and in doing so prove that there's nothing bad in re-producing the old clichés, as long as good music is the final product of the process.

Their penchant for Sci-Fi and ornithology aside, from the first seconds of the album's first two tracks 'Running From The Tyrant' and 'Iwo Jima', it becomes obvious that music-wise Lancer also hasn't changed their ways much since their 2013 debut album. Well, perhaps minus the silly glove puppets from their 'Young And Alive' video. It's mostly about standardized Power Metal gallops with high-pitched vocals and an awful lot of Iron Maiden-esque references (Isak Stenvall's hairdo being just one of many). Clichéd...? Well, definitely so – as is the entire Power Metal genre, with just a few estimable exceptions. But some of us have grown up with 'The Number Of The Beast' and some of us saved our lunch money for months to become proud owners of 'Keeper Of The Seven Keys'.

Those fans will love the rich, monumental twin guitar attack of 'Masters And Crowns' and the furious pounding of the spectacularly tight rhythm section that drives 'Behind The Walls'. 'Aton' is the longest track on the album, and simultaneously also its ultimate highlight, as it combines nifty instrumental work with frequent changes of pace and intensity, all embroidered with perfectly crafted melody. 'Children Of The Storm' could have been mistaken for a once-shelved-and-now-unearthed outtake of any old Hammerfall album; nevertheless, the almost-Operatic vocal harmonies throughout the entire track are nothing but amazing. 'Steelbreaker' hurtles forward at breakneck speed, followed by the dark-ish, atmospheric piece 'Eyes Of The Liar' with majestic choruses and again, very well-performed vocal parts. 'Fools Marches On' ends the album on a high note, rocketing rather than marching into its six minutes of guitar-laden madness.

The first words that come to mind while looking at Lancer's cover artwork whilst filling the air with their galloping guitar passages may be "generic" and "clichéd", that is true. But also true is the fact that you should acquiesce to your inner Power Metal fan's demands and give 'Second Storm' a try anyway. While there's not much of novelty here, the sound of Lancer's second album is dynamic yet melodic, the guitar work fittingly intense with the vocal parts strong and harmonic.

Innovative it is not, but this is certainly a good Metal record to be blasted through your speakers and enjoyed.

Alexandra Mrozowska

LAST AUTUMN'S DREAM – 'LEVEL ELEVEN' *(AOR HEAVEN)* AOR

Another year goes by and we have another Last Autumn's Dream album to get to grips with. Like clockwork, LAD turns up at the start of each New Year with their latest Melodic offering and 2015 is no exception.

'Level Eleven' is, as the title suggests, the eleventh in a long line of great sounding AOR albums from this band and if the adage "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" was ever coined for

RICHIE KOTZEN – 'CANNIBALS' *(Headroom Inc)* ROCK

What sets Richie Kotzen apart from many is his ability to absorb and embrace so many musical styles, then write songs incorporating them into a piece of work that is essentially his own. Many artists go out of genre but it frequently sounds stilted and false, Kotzen does it like breathing.

'Cannibals' is a sumptuous feast of Funk and Soul with Jazz and R&B overtones all stamped with the Kotzen signature. Overall the album is stripped back, it's simple and uncluttered with the emphasis on the songs and the lyrics; the production is stunning, crisp, warm and pure.

Title track 'Cannibals' is deliciously upbeat and Funky, the bass lines groove it along like a heartbeat and it Rocks along to the solo easily. 'Come On Free' Rocks the 1970's Soul vibe to perfection, this could have sat happily on a Marvin Gaye album. Which brings us to 'I'm All In', a Funky Soul piece featuring the legendary dUg Pinnick, their voices work together like whisky and honey and it'll make the hairs stand up on the back of your neck.

'In An Instant' has smooth Jazz overtones but Kotzen's voice oozes Soul, the harmonies are provided by girlfriend Julia Lage. 'Shake It Off' is Rockier with a touch of Salsa, one of the few tracks that's not solely Kotzen, Mike Bennett provides additional percussion.

'Stand Tall' has some schmoozy, Funky Hammond licks and features Billy Sheehan providing the low tones by doubling the vocals, the screaming R&B licks in the background are Lage and Elizabeth Sheehan. 'The Enemy' is a simple song of voice and piano while 'Time For The Payment' is so heartfelt and soulful it will make you shiver; just listen to the acoustic licks and remind yourself this is ALL Kotzen playing. 'Up (You Turn Me)' has a more Gospel vibe.

Lastly, there's 'You', a song that is proof the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, the music was written by his daughter August Kotzen when she was thirteen, and he recorded it so she wouldn't forget it. While recording this album, he found it and added a lyric and melody; the result is haunting and beautiful and a reminder to keep an eye on his daughter who is developing in to a considerable talent in her own right.

If you're a Kotzen fan and know the ropes, you will LOVE this album. If you are coming to it via The Winery Dogs, you need to be prepared that this is not a Heavy Rock album, instead it's a class act from an artist who every time you think he is at the top of his game, just keeps on pulling the sublime out of the proverbial hat.

Helen Bradley Owers

something, then it would likely be for the music of LAD! However I don't mean that last statement to be taken as a criticism. LAD might not have changed their way of writing, playing and performing AOR that much over the years, but when it brings results as catchy and as well played as this album, then that shouldn't really be much of a problem for anyone.

'Kiss Me' is first out of the gate and it's an up-tempo Rocker with some great guitar work from Andy Malecek that is topped off with that distinct Mikael Erlandsson vocal; it sets out the template for what you're about to hear and enjoy from the rest of the songs. 'Follow Your Heart', the Poppy 'I'll B There 4 U', Classic Rocker 'Losing You' (with its rasping Hammond Organ and hard-hitting riff), 'Delirious', the big production ballad 'Made Of Stone' (on which Erlandsson puts in one of his best vocal performances) and 'Star' are all great AOR songs. LAD seem to be able to write and record these types of songs with ease, it's something that many other AOR/Melodic Rock acts have found hard to achieve.

LAD are a band who will hopefully keep on writing albums of this quality and if they do, who are we to complain? We should be grateful that there are bands still out there who want to record and play music like this because it's an art form that is becoming an increasing rarity these days. So it's eleven albums down for Last Autumn's Dream and hopefully eleven more to come.

Ian Johnson

LESOIR – 'LUCTOR ET EMERGO' *(V2)* PROGRESSIVE

'Luctor Et Emergo' (meaning 'Struggle To Emerge') is Dutch band Lesoir's third album and the follow-up release to the well received 'Transience' from 2013. The group is made up of singer/pianist/acoustic guitar player Maartje Meessen, electric guitarist Ingo Daasen, bassist Ingo Jetten, drummer Bob van Heumen and backing vocalist/multi-instrumentalist (she plays guitar, keyboards and percussion) Eleen Bartholomeus.

Lesoir have had high profile support shows with bands such as Karnivool, Delain, The Gathering, Within Temptation and The Pineapple Thief amongst others, and this summer will be guesting for Evergrey.

Last summer they had twelve demos and decided to come to the U.K. to record their latest opus at the famous Airfield Studios in St. Merryn where they once again worked alongside producer John Cornfield (he has produced Muse, Oasis, Stone Roses, Supergrass, Katatonia & New Model Army); his input has given the band an expansive and very clear sound.

The album contains some dark material, Meesen's lyrics dealing with the meaning of life and the complexities surrounding it. So what of the music? At times the band comes across sounding like Tool and at other times they are reminiscent of Mostly Autumn.

Opener 'Battle' is a dark, heavy track, whereas first single 'Going Home' begins lightly before powerful guitars and drumming transform the song into a vastly Rockier albeit very catchy number. '(A Lady Named) Bright' starts off with a Doom-laden feel and then some ferociously heavy guitars nearly knock the listener out of their chair!

There seems to be a recurring theme musically with songs beginning with a lighter shade and then becoming much heavier as they progress. The title track is Folky in places but with a little Pink Floyd and a dark undercurrent, 'Deliberate' and 'Flawless Chemistry' have really crunchy but catchy sounding riffs and 'Room For One More' ends the album on a lighter note with Meessen singing over an acoustic guitar – a nice contrast to what has primarily gone before.

This album should help Lesoir gain new fans as well as keeping current enthusiasts happy. The band are playing European dates in April and May including three in the U.K. and will also be touring China where they have built up quite a following. Catch them if you can as I think it will be an interesting show.

Az Chaudhry

LICHTGESTALT – 'MOTORENHERZ' *(Danse Macabre)* HEAVY METAL

Lichtgestalt means something along the lines of shining light in German. If you expect some light, bright and breezy Euro Rock from these guys you'll be a tad disappointed as something a lot harder and much, much heavier lies in store.

Comparing Lichtgestalt to their German compatriots Rammstein would be rather unfair and lazy. Sure there are similarities; both sing in their native tongue but that wouldn't make you compare Saxon to Duran Duran would it? Then there's the riff-heavy music and Industrial undercurrent providing the rock hard backbone on which both build their material.

But there are differences. Whereas Rammstein head into darker, more Gothic territory, Lichtgestalt move into something more traditional where, at times, the riffs sound as they could have come straight from the Flying V of Rudolph Schenker around the time of the Scorpions classic 'Blackout'. Take 'Tiefenrausch' ('Rapture Of The Deep') for example, where the brief futuristic synth prelude gives way to titanic, bone-crushing riff and the same can be said for the album's title track. 'Zölibat' ('Celibacy') meanwhile has a Metallica-esque kick from the time when they knew how to head into riff overload.

'Spieler' ('Player') sees the band in a more commercial zone and a chorus that features the albums biggest hook and best chance of radio play whereas 'Bereue Dich' ('Regret Yourself'), with its glorious Industrial synth refrain and muscular riff, would be a good place to start if you wanted to dip in and sample what's on offer. An alternative and maybe better place could possibly be the hypnotic drive of 'Drück Ab' ('Pull The Trigger').

While Rammstein's Till Lindemann has a deep baritone that adds a dark, sinister edge to their music, Thomas C. Hertz of Lichtgestalt has a more manic twist and, at times, he seems to veer to the very edge of sanity and it's pretty effective.

For a debut album, 'Motorenherz' ('Engine Heart') has plenty of good ideas and heaps of potential. Although the Rammstein comparisons will undoubtedly follow them around, there is enough in their arsenal to differentiate them from their countrymen and if they can build on those differences and further develop their own style, there could be a bright future awaiting Lichtgestalt.

Mick Burgess

LIKE A STORM – 'AWAKEN THE FIRE' *(Another Century)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

I'm struggling to bring to mind more than a few Modern Rock bands that hail from New Zealand (Auckland to be precise). Like A Storm are essentially the Brooks brothers; Chris (lead vocals/guitar/keyboards/programming), Matt (lead guitar/ keyboards/programming) and Kent (bass/keyboards/programming). They have been active since 2005 and have managed to secure support slots on a number of tours by high profile bands (primarily in the U.S.A.) including Alter Bridge, Shinedown, Korn, Creed and Puddle of Mudd. 'Awaken The Fire' is LAS's third album but their first with major label support.

The uncompromising brand of hard hitting Modern Rock with a twist (I'll come back to that) gets off to a great start with 'Chaos' signaling an energetic mantra and a readily commercial writing ethic. The music's brutality blends perfectly with some strong melodies and features an intelligent use of computer generated sounds and effects. The twist comes in the form of a didgeridoo and, despite what your initial thoughts may be, it works really well and compliments the computerised elements.

The use of loops, samples and keyboards (and didgeridoo) imbues a sense of scope, epic in nature, and adds an extra dimension to the whole album's proceedings. The didgeridoo appears again on the second song 'Love The Way You Hate Me', once again influencing the impact of an up-tempo Modern Rock workout. 'Wish You Hell' is a Cajun-flavoured foot-stomper and a great choice as a single, sitting nicely next to 'Break Free' which, along with 'Southern Skies' and 'Ordinary', act as ballad breaks for the songs of a more incendiary style.

I could have done without the band's take on 'Gangster Paradise', even though I've heard worse covers, as it somewhat detracts from the original material. The production enhances the big guitars and powerful vocals and I can imagine how good everything must sound when performed live.

Like A Storm are by no means original; the music is just a variation on that produced by so many artists these days but the quality is high and I know that I love it.

Dave Bott

LORDS OF THE TRIDENT – 'FROSTBURN' *(Killer Metal)* HEAVY METAL

American Metal maestros Lords Of The Trident are very serious about their music. In a recent interview they said "this CD will cement us as the world's greatest band in the history of time" and that "it may be the best Metal album ever produced since the dawn of time". Before you dismiss them as arrogant knob-heads, be aware that LOTT are not averse to a little tongue-in-cheekery, as evidenced by their stage names (Fang VonWrathenstein anyone?).

The big surprise, after looking into the band, is that 'Frostburn' does not come across as a Comedy Metal album. What it actually is, is a cheesy Power Metal album that manages to overcome its cheesiness with the sheer enjoyability of the music. The lyrics are all a bit "manly" and "fighty", but the tunes are, at times, sublime and it's all done really well. It's fast enough to fit in the Power Metal bracket, cheesy enough to be compared to Manowar and good enough to appeal to fans of either. If you are intrigued, there's a cool lyric video for 'Winds Of The Storm' online that should make it easier to decide if you will like the band or not.

In all honesty, Lords Of The Trident seem like a band who started off as a bit of a laugh (their first release was 'Death Or Sandwich') and realized that they could both have fun and release proper music. I have a feeling that they are a lot of fun live, and it's cool that you can just enjoy the music or dive all the way in and read their daft interviews and promotional silliness.

'Frostburn' may be "manly" Metal for "manly" men on the surface, but there's a talent for song-writing and playing that may take some people by surprise. The awesome album cover doesn't hurt, either.

Alan Holloway

LOSE CONTROL – 'LET IT BE KNOWN' *(Independent)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Lose Control was founded in Hermosa Beach, California by guitarists Jeff Nisen and A.J. Bartholomew in 2011. Teaming up with drummer/producer Mike Sutherland they created a

self-titled EP that was released in June 2012. In 2013 Patrick Salmon became the full-time drummer and with the addition of bass player Mitch Davis the line-up was completed. 'Let It Be Known' is the debut album and in general can be regarded as Modern Rock with elements of Heavy Metal.

'Bulletproof' gets things off to a good start; the song is up-tempo and aggressive in the main but contains a reflective bridge in contrast. 'The Weight Of The Sea' has a number of time changes that border on Progressive and this varies the musically themes without losing too much identity. The dual lead guitar sound is a strong feature of '...Known' and highlights some accomplished musicianship. The vocals are by no means exceptional but I have heard a lot worse on a number of recent releases.

'Overboard' and 'Insane' lack a bit of quality and emphasise a lack of ideas and originality but 'Gone' has a commercial appeal at its core. It has some nice melody lines and Pop/Rock undertones, married with a pleasant hook and as such is the closest thing to a single from the album's ten tracks. Unfortunately 'When Lies Become Natural' seems to be a couple of good guitar solos in search of a decent song, yet still gives Nisen and Bartolomew a chance to demonstrate their skills. For an independent release the production values are quite good and in the main the songs have a live feel about them.

There are moments of quality that hint at a mature song-writing ethic but on the whole Lose Control's debut is average at best. I can't help thinking that at times everything is just a showcase for the lead guitars and the songs are secondary and this is the main problem that needs addressing if the band intend to continue in a recording capacity.

Dave Bott

LOVE CHILD – 'CIRCUS IN TOWN' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

These Australians have an old-school groove going on. This is Rock but more in tune with R 'n' B (no...not the modern, booty-grinding variety but the old-school 1960's style of Rhythm and Blues). This is the sound of a tight band serving the songs.

Whilst there's guitar and it does provide the odd stinging lead as found on the "blue-eyed Soul" of 'Dirty Soul', it's less about guitar power and more about the groove. What you get then is the feel of those wonderful old Stax records that Booker T And The MGs used to play on. The music is only there to support the singer and the song. Steve Hancock has a good Soul, Rock voice (but he doesn't have the depth of a Wilson Picket, Sam Cooke or Paul Rodgers but then who does?).

Often it's the little additions to the band's core sound that help colour and give character to the songs. Organ and keyboards complement many of the songs such as 'Lately I'm Confused', the Pop Rock, Country Soul hybrid 'Circus In Town' and the bassy 'Black And Blue Again'. 'Rollin' The Dice' and 'I'd Go Crazy' come across like a clean living version of Keith Richards' solo records and 'It's A Game' has a slight Deep Purple MK1 groove to it. The closing 'Slow Rain' benefits from the backing vocals while 'I'm Running' is given a Bluesier feel thanks to the addition of harmonica.

Although they cite influences of Led Zeppelin, Free, Bad Company, Jimi Hendrix, Aerosmith and The Black Crowes, this doesn't Rock as hard as any of those artists. That's not necessarily a criticism as they tap into a stronger Soul feel. It's the sound of a band working up a sweat but I'm talking a light bead of sweat on the brow rather than dripping sweat here. One to file under Soul Rock.

Duncan Jamieson

MAGIC KINGDOM – 'SAVAGE REQUIEM' *(AFM)* POWER METAL

The name of guitarist, song-writer and producer Dushan Petrossi might not be one that is on the tip of your tongue. However, some of you may well know the names of the bands he has formed and created much better. First off there is the wonderful Iron Mask, which is at this moment in time his day job, but he first came to my notice when he started the wonderful Symphonic Power Metal act Magic Kingdom.

MK's first album 'The Arrival' came out in 1999 and since then they have released two more, the conceptual 'Metallic Tragedy' in 2004 and 'Symphony Of War' in 2010. Yet because of the interest in IM and some personnel setbacks, it seemed that MK had been put to the back of the drawer for the time being and subsequently forgotten about. That is until those nice people at AFM decided to release a brand new album, the gloriously over the top Melodic Metal that is 'Savage Requiem'. Now if you're a lover of galloping riffs, stunning lead guitar work, powerful vocals, chant-along choruses and powerful Metal songs, then you're in for a treat because it's all here.

Just check out the seven minutes plus of 'Guardian Angels' where the band nail your face to the wall with their intense guitar riffs, Symphonic keyboard runs and Petrossi's superb solos and you'll soon hear, and hopefully agree, that your listening to a great Metal album. MK continue the assault on your ears with the blistering 'Rivals Forever', 'Ship Of Ghosts' and 'Four Demon Kings Of Shadowlands'; songs which brought to mind bands like Artension and Royal Hunt (high praise indeed). With that being said, MK aren't just about playing heads down, hundred miles an hour, fast paced Metal. Instead, at various times throughout the album, they temper their songs, giving them brooding, shadowy and dramatic guitar riffs and strong, dark edged vocals courtesy of Petrossi and singer Christian Palin. Finally, in 'Full Moon Sacrifice' and the title track, they have two truly great songs that will surely go down as firm fan favourites when they are played live.

On this showing, five years is way too long for Magic Kingdom to have been away from the music scene and we can only keep our fingers crossed that it won't be another five until we hear from them again. A great comeback album from a great band.

Ian Johnson

MAN – 'REANIMATED MEMORIES' *(Cherry Red/ Esoteric)* PROGRESSIVE

When Steven Wilson played St. David's Hall recently, he amusingly remarked that the last time he played Cardiff, Man and Budgie were the upcoming local bands. That comment alone, warmly delivered, gives some indication of the longevity and status of the Man Band and their sometimes convoluted history.

Amid the recent flurry of excellent re-issues, 'Reanimated Memories' is Man's first new studio album since 2009's 'Kingdom Of Noise' and, it's worth pointing out, the third studio album to feature no original members. That said, given recent line-up stability, the presence of Phil Ryan (keyboards) and Martin Ace (vocals, bass) will provide sufficient credibility for most fans, with the line-up completed by Josh Ace (vocals, rhythm guitar), James Beck (vocals, lead guitar) and Rene Robrahn (drums).

Undoubtedly '...Memories' features eleven well-crafted tracks that, here and there, draw on aspects of Man's considerable heritage (after all, how many spots can a leopard change?). A case in point is 'In Time'; an extended Ryan composition which works hard to inspire. On the one hand, it's nice to see legendary bands still cranking out original material but on the other, there's little here that really echoes Man at their best. Not that this album is likely to harm their legacy at all – it's just not likely to add that much to it.

Despite its Country feel, opener 'The Ballad Of Billy Lee' (which, like 'We Know' and 'One More Ride On The Waltzers' features the pedal steel guitar talents of guest B.J. Cole) has more weight than most of the songs on offer. 'No Solution' smoothly nudges the band towards the middle of the road, which is where they stay for most of the album. 'Ordinary Man' has a bit more to it and is brought to life by Ryan's keyboard touches, but it is only really on the tracks with more of an overt Blues influence, namely 'Got No Money In My Pocket' and 'Nothing Fails Like Success', that Man's characteristic charm, humour and musical playfulness shine through. Elsewhere, it's all nice and pleasant enough, though even the provocatively entitled 'God Delusion' fails to fire up the passions.

I suspect that there is an audience for this sort of album amongst the Man faithful. However, this is not Man as they used to be, it's the sound of a band gently easing its way through its twilight years.

Michael Anthony

ROBBEN FORD – 'INTO THE SUN' *(Provogue)* BLUES/SOUL

Now if you are looking for a set of music that can be described as both pure electric Blues and emotional Soul, then look no further than 'Into The Sun' from Robben Ford. A brilliant and long standing American Blues musician, Ford has played on many albums with many legendary musicians but you would be forgiven if his name doesn't pop out at you immediately. Despite the fact he has been nominated for Grammys five times, he is an unassuming man that just loves to write songs and play the Blues! Ford is very comfortable in a variety of music styles, yet his first love is those emotion-filled Blues and Soul excursions that hit straight in the middle of music lovers' hearts.

'...Sun' finds Ford going back to the purity of his first love, the electric Blues; simple, soulful and both his vocals and especially his guitar skills just brim with emotion. I know, I've mentioned emotion several times but it is just astounding what sounds he is able to create with his guitar, sounds that pull at your very strings of your soul.

This album will certainly move you – each song is an expression within itself, regardless as to who Ford has asked to perform on it. He has asked many artists to share his heartfelt songs; Ford sharing with them his high talents and they in turn relishing in the opportunity to stretch their own extensive abilities! Listening to this man's fret-work will just astonish… then listen to his song-writing skills – he lives at a level that very few can. Both areas of skill may be awesome, yet the musician himself comes across very humble… and I wouldn't be surprised to see Ford busking on a street corner, just for the opportunity to uplift those of us passing by!

'...Sun' is an immersive, master-class exercise in pure Blues and Soul performed superbly, yet humbly – a musical sea of Soul-drenched Blues if you will. His guitar is an extension of his soul! As mentioned, he is comfortable in almost any musical style and on some selections one can hear those various styles creeping in. Now, with that said, don't for a minute, think that Ford is all over the map on this recording – he is not. This is a Blues-based piece of work, an album that just grooves along and creates an immersive tapestry of sound!

At one point in his career, Robben Ford was noted to be among the best guitarists in the twentieth century, I would like to say that that should be extended to the twenty-first century as well! 'Into The Sun' – an absolute stunning record from an equally stunning musical artist!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

MAXXXWELL CARLISLE – 'VISIONS OF SPEED AND THUNDER' *(Killer Metal)* POWER METAL

Billed as a "bodybuilder and Heavy Metal shred guitarist from Los Angeles", former Deathriders (the band built around original Anthrax vocalist Neil Turbin) shredder Maxxxwell Carlisle is perhaps best known as the current Hellion guitarist. He's released a number of solo albums over the years (both vocal and instrumental) and collaborated on other projects with a number of name musicians.

Don't know about you, but the sight of some man mountain hunched over a guitar makes me kinda nervous – remember Kane Roberts with Alice Cooper back in the 1980s? Not only because anyone built like a brick shithouse is physically imposing to most "normal" people, but because your brain automatically categorises them as some lumbering brute with none of the technical dexterity needed to play such a precision instrument. That said, many a book has been completely misjudged by a rather innocuous cover so, as ever, the quality of the contents should ultimately be the decider on whether an album stands or falls.

So what of 'Visions Of Speed And Thunder'? For starters, the guy can certainly shred with the best, although a quick trawl on the web through some of his past associations sort of implied that anyway. Things actually start of quite brightly with the title track (although I could really do without the Justin Hawkins-like falsetto), its marauding mid-tempo licks and Neo-Classically-infused hook coming across as a sort of Racer X meets Rainbow hybrid.

'Marching With The Dragons' knocks it down a gear or two, its chest-beating machismo putting it very much into Manowar territory, whilst the kerosene fuelled 'Full Metal Thunder' punches you in the gut with all the pent up fury of a fledgling Bay Area Thrash band from the early 1980's. From here on in, things start to get a bit samey as Carlisle and his band get caught out by the same old pitfalls many of their predecessors found hard to avoid.

For starters there are too many songs that rely on that one dimensional "full-throttle to the end and bugger the consequences" approach which masks some really good melodies and makes everything sound samey. I know this is supposed to be a fusion of power, shred and speed but slowing it down once in a while would actually accentuate those qualities and give the songs more impact. I'm not saying it's all bad by any means – taken on their own merits the likes of 'Power Angel' (very Hellion) and 'Ramming Speed' (surprisingly

Stratovarius) are fairly enjoyable – just that beyond the first couple of tracks, there's nothing that makes it stand out from the crowd.

Pleasant enough, but if they want to break beyond cult status... much more work is needed on the song-writing.

Dave Cockett

MICHAEL SCHENKER'S TEMPLE OF ROCK – 'SPIRIT ON A MISSION' *(Inakustik)* HARD ROCK

Over the last few years, Michael Schenker has been steadily clawing his way back to the skill, professionalism and audiences he used to have before his "well documented troubles" started. Those issues are now all well back in the past and today he finds himself supported by a really tight band of some pedigree. While I would personally say that his work with UFO, and his earlier solo material, has the edge over his latter day stuff, this new album isn't far behind the earlier offerings if, in fact, it is at all.

That's probably due to the fact that this album was co-written by Schenker and vocalist Doogie White, who you may remember used to be part of Rainbow and Yngwie Malmsteen's band (amongst others), so he knows a thing about working with decent guitarists. The result is an album with multiple identities and, bearing in mind that during the recording of the original takes some guitars were stolen from the studio (is nothing sacred?) which required some performances to be done again, one that has an inherent "in your face" strength about it.

The majority of the album is up-tempo, not quite "Shred Metal" speed but not far off, underpinned by the power and experience of ex-Scorpions men Francis Buchholz and Herman Rarebell. While some of the songs ('Communion', 'Let The Devil Scream' and 'Wicked') take some time to get into, others ('Live And Let Live', 'Vigilante Man' and 'All Our Yesterdays' – which is typical Schenker territory with a really neat guitar sequence) are really strong and immediate songs. 'Bulletproof' reminds me of something Rainbow would have done but strangely more in the Joe Lynn Turner days... a bit 'Death Alley Driver' style if you will. 'Saviour Machine', rather oddly, sees Temple Of Rock do Black Label Society with White's vocal phrasing and execution of the song very similar to that of Zakk Wylde's. Maybe the use of Wayne Findlay's seven-string guitar steered the song this way, but it is intriguing. There is one other song worth mentioning but in a negative way; 'Something Of The Night' does nothing for me if I am honest, with Schenker's guitar actually sounding like an annoyed bee trapped in a jam jar, but no doubt some will like it.

On the face of it, 'Spirit On A Mission' is a strong album with a lot of hooks and melody, in both the vocals and Michael Schenker's solos which is possibly down to the co-writing and two heads being better than one. If so, then mission accomplished.

Andy Brailsford

MOTHER'S FINEST – 'GOODY 2 SHOES & THE FILTHY BEASTS' *(SteamhammerSPV)* HARD ROCK

Atlanta Georgia's ground-breaking Funk Rock phenomenon Mother's Finest have been largely forgotten about since their amazing 'Black Radio Won't Play This Record' release back in 1992. Despite over forty years in existence and a unique style that influenced The Dan Reed Network and countless others, the last two decades has seen just a couple of live albums and 2003's disappointing 'Meta-Funk 'N' Physical', however, promises of a new studio album have finally come to fruition with the help of the Kickstarter pledging system, but has it been worth the wait? Well, for the most part, yes!

The band were formed way back in 1970 and over the lean years have managed to keep together original members Joyce "Baby Jean" Kennedy (vocals), Glenn "Doc" Murdock (vocals) and Jerry "Wyzard" Seay (bass), with guitarist Gary "Moses Mo" Moore rejoining in 2004, whilst drummer Dion Derek (son of Joyce and Glenn) and guitarist John "Red Devil" Hayes have been around since the early nineties. Some releases have favoured Funk over Rock but the band were at their best when both influences were well-balanced, and thankfully this album is one of those.

Turning back the years to 'Black…', 'Angels' gets things underway with an infectious riff, great rhythms and Kennedy's unmistakably gritty vocal, which continues through the similarly groovy Hard Rockers 'Shut Up' and the infectious 'She Ready'. Kennedy takes lead vocals on seven of the ten songs here, the exceptions being Murdock's more placid Funk outings 'Cling To The Cross' and 'I Don't Mind', and the dual leads of the bass-heavy 'Take Control'. However, most of the album's highlights are when Kennedy rips it up on the Soulful 'Another Day', the excellent power ballad 'Tears Of Stone' (short Rap segment notwithstanding!) and the superb Rocker 'All Of My Life', with the album coming to an end with the heavy riff and soaring chorus of the raucous 'My Badd'.

Sound-wise I feel the album is lacking a little, coming across as a tad sterile and lacking the fire of classics like 'Iron Age' and 'Black...', but Mother's Finest are too talented and unique to be anything but impressive. Let's hope there's still enough interest from their European fans to enable them to continue their remarkable journey, as the band have certainly held up their part of the bargain. 'Goody 2 Shoes & The Filthy Beasts' isn't one of their classics but it's certainly good to have them back.

Phil Ashcroft

NIGHT – 'SOLDIERS OF TIME' *(Gaphals)* HEAVY METAL

I reviewed Sweden's NWOBHM throwback Night's self-titled debut album back in issue #62, however the album didn't survive my regular iPod cull, so I was unsure of what I would make of sophomore release 'Soldiers Of Time'.

As soon as I began listening, the reasons for the lack of my endurance came flooding back – the high-pitched, dog-bothering, shrieking vocals of front-man Burning Fire. We're talking Rob Halford, Justin Hawkins and King Diamond all rolled into one, and on opener 'Waiting For The Time' they're way up there "somewhere in the stratosphere" (to quote Shinedown).

Now I'm not purposely being overly picky here as it's obvious Night definitely have what it takes and in all fairness there are some damn good songs here and, when Fire reins in the piercing vocals a few notches, it definitely becomes far more palatable.

There is notable evidence of Night spreading their musical wings in terms of the arrangements. The up-tempo yet acoustic-driven 'Towards The Sky', the short musical interlude 'Wanderlust' and the part-ballad, part-Prog epic album-closer 'Stars In The Sky' (with its classy guitar work) the most discernible examples, whilst the driving 'Secret War' has a more Modern feel, 'Kings And Queens' heads into Motörhead territory and 'Ride On' benefits from the anthemic chorus.

It may not butter my particular muffin and, as with the debut, is unlikely to stay on my iPod for too long, but if you fancy a blend of Iron Maiden, Judas Priest and Saxon and you can stomach those vocals, then Night may well be the band for you.

Ant Heeks

NOCTURNALIA – 'ABOVE, BELOW, WITHIN' *(Gaphals)* ROCK

They almost ruin it completely, but the balance is just in the positive by the end. Swedes Nocturnalia are keen to show their Proto Metal and Blues chops, but to do so they sometimes have to take a little time. And that pushes some of these seven tracks past the six minute mark; not an issue if they're as inventive as The Tangent but not so good if they mine the same seam for minutes on end. Guess which one Nocturnalia do...

There's a real love of Rock ready to break out here, as on 'The Stone' when they try to stick to that rolling groove and shake us up a bit, but there is always the Psyche, 1960's influence to drag us back to an echoing voice, an airy guitar, a long lonesome meander. And yet 'The Watchman' shows what they can do when they plug in and play, the stuttering sixties sweetness with sinuous solo and an almost Percy vocal is undeniable.

Just enough to keep us at the table, but when the faux Pink Floyd comes out, it's time to pass the ham. Nocturnalia have a lot to be proud of here, best not to ruin it by slavish adherence.

Steve Swift

PAPA ROACH – 'F.E.A.R.' *(ElevenSeven)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

Let's face it, Papa Roach left their Nu-Metal roots behind them over ten years ago. The switch to a more Modern/Classic Rock sound began with 'Getting Away With Murder' and it seems to have become more commercial with each subsequent release. There is no danger of the Roach drifting into Pop Music territory but it does appear that Messrs Jacoby Shaddix, Tobin Esperance, Jerry Horton and Tony Palermo are more content to concentrate on the quality of the music rather than let image and aggression dictate the creative mantra.

For the most part the songs on 'F.E.A.R.' are mid-tempo/up-tempo workouts. They are all similar in structure but the melodies and hooks are really strong, making the material accessible and appealing to even those with the keenest pink & fluffy bent. The album seems to feature keyboards and programmed elements in abundance, more than any other in fact. The band seem to change producers on a regular basis and these increased computerised effects could be the influence of Kane Churko, who along with his father Kevin (Five Finger Death Punch, In This Moment) has had a major input into the recording process. The Churko's have contributed to the song-writing and this extra dynamic has ensured a great sound and some classy atmospherics.

'Gravity' nods its head to the musical past and could almost be an Eminem track. It also features an unmistakable contribution from ITM lead singer Maria Brink, typically fiery but certainly an interesting addition to the usual Roach sound. The keyboards in 'War Over Me' have an orchestral feel and it gives the song a depth that is almost epic in nature. Royce Da 5'9" slips a vocal Rap into 'Warriors' and this contrasts nicely with Horton's crushing riffs and the continuing use of samples and loops. Shaddix's vocals have taken on a more relaxed approach on recent releases (he did have a throat issues a few years ago) but he can still slip into a caustic mode if the song dictates.

Some may call 'F.E.A.R.' safe, some may call it predictable, but what Papa Roach do... they do really well. I guess I've become comfortable with the sound now and I don't want it to change because I still love it. If you have been afraid to check out the band because you've only heard the likes of 'Last Resort', 'Dead Cell' and 'Between Angels And Insects' then do yourself and favour and embrace the 'F.E.A.R.'.

Dave Bott

PAT TRAVERS – 'RETRO ROCKET' *(Cleopatra)* HARD ROCK

As much as I was happy that acclaimed Canadian guitarist Pat Travers had finally ditched the Blues to return to Hard Rock with his 2013 album 'Can Do', I'm a bit perplexed by his two recent releases. Firstly there was the distinctly under par 'Live At The Iridium NYC', an album that ran out of steam (and his own songs) less than halfway through and resorted to covers. Secondly, after two albums on Frontiers, he's back with Cleopatra for a record that I can understand the reasoning behind, but don't really enjoy listening to that much. It's especially

THE DIRTY YOUTH – 'GOLD DUST' *(Rmr)* HARD ROCK

The Female-Fronted Rock band from South Wales are on fine form on this, their second full-length album. They blend spunky Punk attitude with Classic Rock, Modern Rock and even some Pop nous. In lead singer Danni Monroe, they have a good, versatile singer who imbues the songs with heaps of melody and youthful angst.

The song 'Just Move On' is so catchy, with its whiff of Paramore and a bubble-gum chorus that it really should be all over Radio 1 (assuming kids even know what a radio is these days). It's the kind of song that deserves to be a big summer smash in the Alt-Metal and mainstream charts. 'The One' manages the difficult job of balancing Heavy Rock with underlying Dance Music beats yet the band pull it off and this is another catchy Rocker that should get audiences moshing and dancing at the same time.

'The Darkest Wedding' has arch lyrics about people getting married who are ill-suited to one another and contains some nice musical touches such as Monroe's opening vocal, mirroring a priest's words at a wedding ceremony – "dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..." – and the subversive use of keyboards to sound like a church organ. A music video for this one seems like a must and this could be another hit for them.

In fact throughout there are nice musical touches that elevate this above many of the Bullet For My Valentine wannabees such as the Classic Rock sounding solo on 'I'm Not Listening To You' or the piano intro to 'Invincible'; a modern take on a power ballad, which has an epic Rock vibe with a knockout chorus that keeps the albums quotient of hooks very high.

The Dirty Youth, if given the right backing, have the potential with their Metal, Punk, Pop potpourri to have their songs worshipped and their posters plastered on the walls of the post-Emo generation.

Duncan Jamieson

THE KING LOT – 'THE KING LOT' *(Crown Jewels)* ROCK

Bathgate in Scotland isn't known for its rich heritage in Rock bands, but it's about to be. The King Lot – a threesome who have a huge breadth of influences and aren't afraid to show them – have a debut record out and put simply, you need to hear it. Hard hitting and "in your face" yet as melodic as you could wish for and memorable in way that few debuts could even hope for, this self-titled platter is an album to sing along to, shake your ass to, punch the air to and play air guitar to. If you can think of it, you can do it to this album… yes, even that!

Let's start the Generation Game conveyor belt to see what influences we have up for grabs tonight. Oh, there's The Wildhearts (good game, good game), you'll find them in the opening blast of 'As They Burn'. Next up there is an aggressive, Punky Def Leppard (nice to see them, to see them nice), that's the utterly addictive 'Addicted'. Pay attention, following that it's Rod Stewart and now we're talking the verse of 'Telegram' and in fairness it's more like The Faces than Rod The Mod, while the chorus is the sort of thing Gun have been trying to write for a long time (Higher than a Jack you say? Sorry…wrong game show…). This leads us nicely onto the acoustic Rawk An' Rowl of 'Queen Of Hearts', which simply dares you not to sing along!

We haven't even touched on 'Let's Get Together' where a clunkering drum beat heralds in a burst of guitars that raises the hairs on the back of the neck and holds them there, rigid, for just over three minutes. This is prime-time Little Angels and come on, who doesn't soil themselves at the thought of that? At times U2 spring to mind, even Baby Chaos (remember them? No? You should!) make an appearance, marking The King Lot out as a band whose one and only aim is to make the best music they can and to hang with genre tag nonsense; good time Rock n' Roll never needed no other name!

This all leaves only one question… are debut albums allowed to be this good?

Steven Reid

disappointing after the flurry of interest caused by the recent box-set featuring eight of his nine classic Polydor albums.

'Retro Rocket' features his recent touring band of drummer Sandy Gennaro, second guitarist Kirk McKim and bassist Rodney O'Quinn. The idea behind it was to make an album like they used to in the 1970s, with a very live sound, hardly any guitar effects and a jam-like feel. This would be fine if the songs were anything to write home about, but sadly with a gruff voice that isn't getting any better and instrumental sections that take up over half of each track, the quality isn't strong enough to pull off this kind of approach. 'I Always Run' has good riffs and lead playing but not much in the way of hooks, and similarly 'Searching For A Clue' has some cool organ and guitar interplay, but the vocals are pushed so far into the background that it sounds like a live demo. 'Up Is Down' is another track that consists of just over a minute of actual song and around four minutes of instrumental jam, whilst 'Mystery At The Wrecking Yard' does the same, albeit with a better song part and good lyrics.

Thankfully some of the later tracks almost rescue this release. The instrumental 'You Can't Get Their From Hare' has a nice arrangement and both 'I Am Alive' and 'I Wanna Be Free' are proper concise songs with good melodies. It's a little confusing to have a live version of 'Looking Up', introduced as the new album's title track (it came out in 1996 so I guess that's when it was recorded!), but that and the succinct Walking Dead soundtrack song 'Lead Me Home' both highlight how much better Travers' voice was a few years ago. I may be wrong but the short gap between the live album and this suggests to me that Frontiers may have had a two album deal and turned down 'Retro Rocket' prompting the live album to finish the deal and leaving Pat Travers free to shop this around. Either way it's a bit of a disappointment.

Phil Ashcroft

PAUL RAYMOND – 'REWIND 50' *(Pariah Music)* ROCK

For those unfamiliar with Paul Raymond, he is the current keyboard player/rhythm guitarist for the Rock institution known as UFO. Aside from numerous spells with the band, he has been actively involved as a musician with several other acts for fifty years, hence the album title. Raymond is possibly the unsung member of UFO, regarded in some circles as the glue that has held them together through some well documented volatile times, though he never really gets to express himself enough as a writer. 'Rewind 50' contains newly recorded versions of songs he has written during his career.

It is interesting to hear some familiar songs performed with a different singer (all sung by Raymond) and kudos must go to the current Paul Raymond Project line-up (Mark Coles, Dave Burn, Tony Steel and Andy Simmons) for the job they have done here. Raymond acts as the main backing singer in UFO and though he will never win any awards as a front-man, it is a pity his role always seems to be underestimated next to a more charismatic singer and guitarist.

The interpretations of the more recent material (UFO, Michael Schenker Group, PRP), such as 'Never Trust A Stranger' and 'Sympathy', mirrors the current UFO style and there is a distinct Bluesy vibe running through the songs. Raymond's vocals and the tweaks to the arrangements generate a freshness and I know they go down well when Raymond performs with his own band.

'Welcome To The Real World' is a PRP song that breaks down to a nice piano refrain and a guitar solo straight out of the Schenker playbook. 'All Belongs To You' is a song from the 1983 'Vices' album by Waysted and could actually be 'Only You Can Rock Me' Part 2. The keyboard textures have a 1970's feel and the Honky-Tonk piano riff that appears halfway through is very Retro. Some of the later songs on the album are Pop/Blues numbers from the 1960's and if I'm honest they leave me a little cold. I can understand their inclusion and Raymond's attachment to them as they document his time in Chicken Shack, Plastic Penny and Tony Jackson And The Vibrators.

UFO have often been criticised in the past for their unimaginative set-lists so 'Rewind 50' is a great way to spend some time with someone with bundles of talent who is not afraid to sidestep the limelight and let the music do the talking.

Dave Bott

PETER BANKS EMPIRE – 'THE MARS TAPES' *(Gonzo Multimedia)* PROGRESSIVE

Readers of a certain age will know that Peter Banks was the original guitarist with Yes but was soon replaced by Steve Howe as part of the changes that would create the band's unique sound and ultimately take them on to legendary status. After that Banks, from my perspective, became a peripheral figure on the scene, dabbling with Flash before forming Empire and very occasionally appearing on Yes-related output.

This release represents version three of Empire, in rehearsals at Mars Studios in Los Angeles during 1979, and that effectively makes these tracks live demos, many of the songs never having appeared on an official album until this substantial two disc package; a consequence of that being that the sound quality of the recordings leaves a lot to be desired with plenty of hiss, buzzes and crackles.

Anyone expecting any Yes-like material will be sadly disappointed with there being only fleeting glimpses of his former band, but (of course) it was Howe's guitar sound that became one of their most distinctive elements.

In this incarnation of the band, Banks is joined by female vocalist and co-writer Sidonie Jordan (aka Sydney Foxx), Mark Murdock (drums), Brad Stephenson (bass) and Paul Delph (keyboards). Jordan was both a staff-writer and recording artist with A&M and apparently has an extensive list of music credentials to her name, probably not in genres close to the average Fireworks reader's heart. From a musical standpoint it's far from terrible; there are any number of very tasteful passages and themes but there's a lack of consistency which is not surprising when you consider that this is material being worked up and developed. Some of it would fit very neatly into the "eclectic" category.

Of interest to some will be the appearance on the bonus track 'Sky At Night' of a certain Phil Collins (drums) and his Brand X cohort John Giblin (bass) which gives you something of a clue as to the general style of material on offer, closer to the Jazz and experimental end of BX rather than the grandiose Symphonic elements of Yes.

All the above aspects taken into consideration, I have to conclude that this release is going to be of very limited appeal and is likely to be an item only actively sought out by existing Banks fans and Collins completists.

Sadly, Banks passed away in 2013 and like many artists who suffer the same fate, unfinished and previously unreleased material (whether it actually deserves to or not) starts to appear.

Gary Marshall

PHOSPHENE – 'PHOSPHENE' *(Independent)* HARD ROCK

Contrary to normality regarding self-titled albums, this is actually Phosphene's sophomore release hot on the metaphorical heels of last year's debut 'Any Last Words'. They are considered one of Chicago's hardest working bands and that would seem to fit given the group have already self-financed two releases in about a year. What with a tour already under their belts with the major publicity garnering outfit The Pretty Reckless and a headlining appearance at the official Lollapalooza after party at the Hard Rock Café in Chicago, alongside TV appearances on Fox News, ABC 7 News and singing the national anthem on ESPN's 'Friday Night Fights' (hosted by Mike Tyson), you'd be forgiven for wondering why they aren't signed or have a major backer interested in them.

Influenced by numerous classic and current bands including Chicago's own Styx and The Smashing Pumpkins and with lead singer Jeni Leigh dining out on a probably combination of Stevie Nicks, Christine McVie, Pat Benatar and Amy Lee, this Hard Rock/Pop Metal quartet have a lot going for them.

From Evanescence through to Skarlett Riot and stopping off at Paramore (and all their imitators), you've heard this Melodic Hard Rock with impassioned female vocals numerous times but Phosphene do it with enough conviction, power and melody to prove they are no pale imitation of the afore-mentioned bands. This self-titled release pretty much carries on from '...Words' and is worthy of being added to the collection of any Female-Fronted Rock and Metal fan alongside the debut.

The militarised drumming by sticks-man Andrew Cantore on the "rebel Rocker" 'Riot', the punchy, melodic 'Hold On', the rhythmic Rocker 'Anti-Hero' (courtesy of guitarist Dan Bikar) or the atmospheric 'Day After Tomorrow' with its Trancy beats and sounds are all worthy of your attention. Bassist Michael Salazar is solid and gets to elaborate here and there but it has to be said that Cantore is an very impressive drummer – reminding me a lot of a young Tommy Lee – and on the riffy 'Mechanical Heart' he certainly gets to experiment with some nice drum patterns. The song 'Michael' has a darker edge to it amongst all the Pop Metal stylings and I can't help but wonder if it's about Leigh's father who passed away when she was in junior high-school when she references the phrase "never got to say goodbye". Mention must go to the piano version of final song 'Lock Me Away' though. I have heard a live acoustic version of this but this album version is a gorgeous impassioned ballad and simply on this song alone Leigh and her cohorts deserve to be signed, or at least be given more exposure.

Money men, what are you waiting for?

Carl Buxton

PIG IRÖN – 'SERMONS FROM THE CHURCH OF BLUES RESTITUTION' *(Off Yer Rocka)* HARD ROCK

Pig Irön is a U.K.-based band with a sound which is pure Hard Rock with Bluesy roots. The band consists of Johnny Ogle on vocals and harmonica (sprinkled throughout the album), guitarist Dan Edwards, Hugh Gilmour on bass and Joe Smith on drums. They have just released their fifth album with a rather grandiose title – but the album does do what is says on the tin, that's for sure! All the tracks are uncompromising; full-on could be another term.

Album opener 'Wildcat Birdhead' sets the scene, with the vocals of Ogle reminiscent of Robert Plant in his early Led Zeppelin period. 'One Final Kiss' is a standout track; broody with a strong chorus and Edwards' stratospheric guitar solo held together by Gilmour's relentless bass motif.

The title of the album nods it head to a U.S. Blues universe and there are Country and Southern Rock touches throughout; the most obvious track in this pocket is the mid-tempo 'The Spell'. A bit of vocal harmony in the verse creates a "good ol' boys" feel to proceedings. In addition, there is a harp (harmonica that is!) solo towards the end just to confirm the mood.

The Black Crowes' territory is explored on the raucous 'The Devil In The Woodpile' and contains very "in your face" drums courtesy of Smith. The album is consistent to the end with the epics 'Take Your Burden To The Lord' and 'Restitution Blues' forming a classy tailpiece to proceedings.

Throughout the album, the musicianship is of high quality and it's nice to hear the bass turned up and adding to the songs rather than just supporting them. Following on from 2012's 'IV', this is another accomplished recording by Pig Irön and will surely keep their fan base happy.

Rob McKenzie

RAVEN – 'EXTERMINATION' *(Steamhammer/SPV)* HEAVY METAL

So, to the Gallagher brothers – stick with it though because we're not talking those upstanding ambassadors of arrogance and assurance Liam and Noel, but John and Mark who have been the basis of Raven for over forty years. Forty years indeed! So how come they remain an underground phenomenon?

Their secret to their longevity may well lie in the fact that they don't take themselves too seriously and obviously have a passion for what they do – all Gallaghers take note. A sense of exuberance and impudence pervades what the self-styled three musketeers do resulting in a set of songs which are as authentic and unpretentious as you can get. Their roots are clearly set in the NWOBHM and with song titles referencing monsters, thunder, bullets and tanks while closing out with the tongue in cheekiness of bonus track 'Malice In Geordieland' (as an amusing afterthought), 'Extermination' is a swaggeringly exuberant Heavy Metal cause for celebration.

Granted, a couple of songs into the album you get a pretty good idea of what's going to come. There's no tolerance for self-indulgent solos or lengthy workouts in the nonstop battery of what's quite a full sound for a three piece. Songs such as 'Scream' might see them lumped in with the likes of the Speed and Thrash crew, but Raven are distinctly British and without being overtly commercial, clearly have some immediate appeal – what you might even call easy on the ear, in a Hard Rock and Metal sense.

'Thunder Down Under' is their full-on tribute to AC/DC; for once, the bass drum frenzy giving way to a more reasonable four to the bar beat and giving the chance to spot all the AC/DC references in the lyrics. Just when you think you know what's coming, the road to predictability takes a sharp turn. 'Golden Dawn' and 'River Of No Return' offer up something a little unusual towards the end of the album. The former an absorbing instrumental containing some ringing acoustic guitar while the latter could be classed as the big production number; a much less frantic pace, all anthemic chords and lyrically more thought provoking.

Despite some history with a couple of the big names of Rock – Metallica and Anthrax have shared the bill in their early days – it's not likely that Raven will be heading to your local arena but you're more likely to run into them "doon the toon" (down the town to our non U.K. readers) at the bar of a local club near you providing the perfect musical accompaniment to your brown ale.

Mike Ainscoe

RELOAD – 'HOTTER THAN A BULLET' *(Rock Of Angel)* MELODIC ROCK

Reload were originally formed in the summer of 2012 in Larissa, Greece, releasing their album, 'Hotter Than A Bullet' in the summer of 2014. The album boasts ten original Heavy Melodic Rock songs with an AOR-tinge and is very much in the vein of their fellow Greek compatriots Redrum.

Album opener 'Give Into The Night' has a Dokken feel and is well executed by a very competent set of musicians. The majority of the tracks on 'Reload' are fast-paced, captivating, Hard Melodic Rock with singer Kostas Tokas (Power Crue) possessing one of those voices that sounds very familiar and, to my ears, is a cross between Mikael Erlandsson (Last Autumn's Dream), Michael Bormann (Jaded Heart) and Thomas Seeburger (Human Zoo).

'...Bullet' is a very well produced album courtesy of the band and Babis "Bob" Katsionis who is best known for his involvement with Heavy/Power Metal bands Firewind, Revolution Renaissance and Outloud. Katsionis also contributes all the keyboards on the album.

'Superhero' chugs along at some pace aided by the rhythm section of Elias Papadopoulos (Isospin) on bass and female drummer Marianiki Toka (Normah) – who contributes backing vocals on several tracks – and brings to mind German Power Metallers Edguy, whilst 'Comeback' is reminiscent of very early Bon Jovi when they still knew how to Rock.

'Longin' For Your Love', 'Candle In The Night', 'Alone' and 'Higher' continue the up-tempo theme of the album and all feature some fine guitar solos courtesy of founder Teo Ross (ex-Diary Of Secrets, solo) and Tasos Lazaridis.

The Scorpions style ballad 'Prince Of Steel' sees a nice change in pace and prevents the album becoming too one-paced and turns into a mini-epic. The closing salvo of 'Survive' and 'Fight' are quite strange with the former almost sounding like a demo version of the latter. 'Survive' is very catchy and features a blistering guitar solo but does suffer from being one of those songs where the chorus is just repeated too much. 'Fight' concludes the album in a Melodic Metal style and has the listener wanting to Reload and play 'Hotter Than A Bullet' through again.

The Greeks might have a failing economy but at this point in time, their Melodic Rock scene is thriving.

Mark Donnelly

ROB MORATTI – 'TRIBUTE TO JOURNEY' *(Escape)* AOR

As the title of this album suggests, this is Rob Moratti's tribute to the band that made him want to be a singer in the first place, namely the mighty Journey. What is on offer is twelve classic Journey tracks including 'Mother, Father', 'Only The Young', 'Ask The Lonely', 'Don't Stop Believin", 'Who's Cryin' Now' etc, that have been faithfully re-created by Moratti and his band mates.

Unfortunately, and it pains me to say this, that also happens to be this album's main problem and Achilles heel because the re-creations are just too "samey" for comfort. For example, guitarist Torben Enevoldsen (Section A, Acacia Avenue, Fate) has, as far as I am concerned, a guitar sound and style all of his own. It is one that you recognize straight away when you hear it regardless of what act it is part of. Yet on this release it's gone, supplanted by him trying his best to sound almost exactly like Neal Schon (which he almost does).

When I played this album, the first thought that I had was that if I'm going to listen to Steve Perry era Journey songs, then I might as well go and actually listen to Journey with Perry doing them. To be fair, this is much more my problem than it is Moratti's or his comrades… it's just a personal thing.

You see if you put the Journey thing to one side (which is hard I'll admit), what you have here is an album full of very strong performances which are complimented by an excellent production and of course "those songs". But what can I tell you about "those songs" that has not already been said once if not a thousand times? Nothing, that's what!

At the end of the day, this is one of those albums that really is for you, our readers, to hear and make up your own minds about it because I'm not really sure, in all honesty, whom it's aimed at.

Ian Johnson

THE TANGENT – 'A SPARK IN THE AETHER' *(Inside Out)* PROGRESSIVE

We really should cherish Andy Tillison and The Tangent. He would probably hate that, but since the mid-nineties they have been producing eighties-inflected, yet still far ranging, music in the best way of the Prog tradition, sounds that constantly surprise and delight. That may be due to the ready allowance of flutes, saxes and trumpets but also due to a real ear for melody, cynically humorous lyrics and superb playing.

Last time out, 'Le Sacre Du Travail' was a sweeping, masterful piece; it was a lot to take in for one sitting but provided real pleasure. This, a return to 'The Music That Died Alone' concept, is more contained and accessible but still has those gorgeous flights of fancy we know TT love so much.

So the title track clusters around an uplifting riff which is difficult to get rid of even days later, a real tightly packed wonder, followed by 'Codpieces And Capes', which showcases TT's never suppressed Jazzy side, a cheekily refreshing Prog travelogue which visits all those familiar musical tropes but is in no way hackneyed.

The centrepiece is, of course, 'The Celluloid Road'; twenty odd minutes which seem like five that is based around Hollywood and a love of the movies, play the "spot the reference" game, delight in the film narrative whilst the brilliant band give us all the music we can handle. The vibe opens out and closes down, Steely Dan smoothness is invoked and a Roger Waters brittleness is shown. And the middle section? A thing of Funky wonder, all 1970's horn parps and frenetic bass – Tillison has said that Jonas Reingold was delighted when he was given it to play and who can be surprised? This is audacious but expected and utterly sublime, in fact it is revisited in the closing 'San Francisco Radio Edit' and works just as well, underlining what a 'Shaft' homage it is – "who's the band who gets all the chicks... The Tangent... you're damn right"... indeed!

This is played with love and imperious talent by a wonderful band who have all the hallmarks of the time they've been together. And of course Tillison's light shows no sign of dimming, he remains a powerhouse of marvellous music and this album is one of the best in an already glittering canon. Culturally, politically and emotionally, Tillison is what Prog should be – inclusive, questioning and very entertaining. Seek The Tangent out... this is the spark you're looking for.

Steve Swift

ROBIN GEORGE – 'DANGEROUS MUSIC II' *(Angel Air)* ROCK

Recent years have been very kind to Robin George (he of 1980's smash hit 'Heartline' fame) fans, with the guitarist, singer and song-writer regularly teaming up with Angel Air to release a whole host of previously unavailable or deleted albums – and George has more of both than most. Hot on the heels of 'History', which brought together a host of pre-debut album recordings, comes 'Dangerous Music II', a set of songs intended for a follow-up release to the album from which it takes its name.

The 'Heartline' single made George an overnight sensation; TV appearances and live performances galore, however, with time spent working with everyone from Phil Lynott to Robert Plant, Glenn Hughes to David Byron, it also disguised the true and respected talent he possessed. The 'Dangerous Music' album, which spawned the smash hit, was an album which keenly straddled the Soft Rock, AOR and Pop market of the time; synth and guitar equal bedfellows. So it should be no surprise that '…II' follows a similar route.

Now, nobody's trying to pretend that the seventeen tracks presented here aren't demos and as such, the sound isn't always pristine (there's even a couple of sound drop-outs as the songs progress). Yet with Charlie Morgan (drummer for Kate Bush and Elton John) and Pino Palladino (now The Who's bassist of choice) contributing to a number of selections, there's also a serious Rock pedigree. Key to that is George's guitar work which, when it comes to the fore, proves remarkably fiery and precise as it belts you about the nether regions. However for much of this collection, dated synth sounds dominate; albeit in a tasteful way which even (at times) reminds of Peter Gabriel ('Computer Games') although for much of the album we are talking a far more 1980's Pop vibe.

That said, 'The American Way' is a thumping Funk Rock Pop number, 'No More Mister Nice Guy' is classy, glistening electro-AOR with a great guitar solo and 'Red For Danger' is a busy piece of Soul-infused Pop that you can easily imagine Hughes thriving on. Many of the tracks are George working alone and as such it is drum machine and synths which dominate, yet even here the super AOR of 'Mona Lisa Smile' or 'Heart To Heart' shine with a class few U.K. acts from the era could hope to match.

For Robin George fans this release is a simple "must have" although the liner notes, interesting though they are, barely discuss the songs it contains. Casual listeners may take a while to adjust their ears to the sound quality and era that these recordings come from, but good songs are good songs irrespective.

Steven Reid

SACRED BLOOD – 'ARGONAUTICA' *(Pitch Black)* POWER METAL

"Right lads, we need a concept, an epic tale to explore for our next album... Well, I went to Torbay last year... Yes, lovely part of the country, but I was thinking of something universal, a story we can all believe in... I bought a box of eggs yesterday and two of them were broken... Erm..."

And so Sacred Blood go for the "Golden Fleece" legend. Okay, there's loads in it. But there isn't loads in this music; they lean towards Symphonic, Battle and Power Metal with a

few choral voices and some acoustic passages.

Of course that's not all, almost, but not quite. We do have a few moments of scabrous riffing and these are nectar in a desert of double beats. Epeios Phocaeus has a dramatic delivery, there is narration galore (as expected) and solos that run away widdling furiously. There is light and shade here, in line with the concept and that is to be applauded, the acoustic and orchestral moments give us sweet pause, but generally this is a barrage of Celtic-tinged Metal.

When the riffs ride out and the backing is tight, the interest rises, when the strings jab in, there's definitely a desire for more. It's the Folk Battle that makes the mind wander; all that sweaty codpiece action.

I understand that there are those that love it, and this is more accessible than some and will be a great offer. It's just that there's a lot of it about and this is just some of it, their narration is entertaining, but there is just too much of everyone else's stuff in here and that's the problem.

Steve Swift

SCOTT WEILAND & THE WILDABOUTS – 'BLASTER' *(earMUSIC)* ROCK

This is what Scott Weiland did next. After the drug busts, the "he's in then he's out" Stone Temple Pilots saga, the "lead singer disease" Velvet Revolver comments and the brilliantly odd solo albums, here he is again doing what he wants and excelling at being him.

Let's face it, STP with Chester Bennington are okay for an aperitif, but he is not a patch on the charismatic, melodic front-man who preceded him. Weiland has never been afraid of showing us who he loves - that David Bowie fixation is clear and clever whilst the bopping pixie himself, Marc Bolan, is all over this (and not just because of a ramped up version of '20th Century Boy' either).

Others have mentioned Funk, but this has the glitter stomp of Glam and the fuzz of a Garage band. When allied to those Weiland standard sugar hit melodies, it works beautifully. He sways, he preens, he pleases; oh, how he pleases. Partners in crime are the Wildabouts; Tommy Black, Jeremy Brown and Dan Thompson, but this is Weiland touching all his bases.

And so 'Modzilla' screams "this is what you've missed" with its dirty riff, shining chorus and itchy Funkiness, 'Hotel Rio' even starts with handclaps before stack heels strut the floor and 'White Lightning' has a tush-shaking stripper vibe.

This is wonderful stuff, even if we can't help but say "oh, that's STP"; it is the nearest he had been to them. Sometimes we may have heard him do this before (lovely though it is) but, like 'Beach Pop', when a Bowie dramatic turn arrives, it transforms an acceptable song into a great one. And he ends with a simple 1970's acoustic ballad in 'Circles', catching his breath and putting himself to bed safely.

This doesn't have the sweep, aspiration and sheer chutzpah of 'Happy In Galoshes' (not much does), but 'Blaster' has all that he has done previously in one gorgeous package. Where will he go next? To the moon, my friend, to the moon.

Steve Swift

SECRET RULE – 'TRANSPOSED EMOTIONS' *(Rocksector)* PROGRESSIVE

Talk about not letting the grass grow beneath your feet. Italy's Secret Rule were formed just over a year ago, yet in that short time frame created and recorded their debut album 'Transposed Emotions'. Fronted by Angela Di Vincenzo and joined by guitarist Andy Menario, who has in the past worked with the likes of Vinny Appice and Jeff Pilson, along with Michele Raspanti on bass and drummer Ruben Ramirez, the band set about writing the material that would become their first record. '...Emotions' features an ambitious, full-sounding production creating an impressive range of dynamics with plenty of punch yet retaining a subtlety that is required for what is, at times, complex Progressive Metal.

'The Journey' starts things off at a frantic pace with swirling keyboards riding the wave over a driving riff; Di Vincenzo quickly stamps her impressive voice all over the song. That voice just gets better on 'The Sin', a groove heavy riff straight from Lzzy Hale's arsenal along with a sweet, melodic delivery by Di Vincenzo combine with such effectiveness. As the album progresses SR hit their stride and open up. 'True Friend' commences with some soaring Dream Theater-esque keyboards before Di Vincenzo's Pop-infused melody serves as a counter point to the more sinister guitar riff. Menario really makes his mark with an inspired lead break.

Sometimes Progressive Metal albums can be too relentless, a barrage of notes and time changes that can be a real chore to listen to in one sitting. SR score highly here by varying the pace and the mood and heaping on piles of melody to keep the ideas fresh. 'Lifeless' is a perfect example of this and features a killer chorus again highlighting Di Vincenzo's impressive vocals. 'Sensation', with its almost Industrial and hypnotic keyboard refrain, has a killer hook that gives SR a heads up against many of their peers.

Probably Di Vincenzo's finest moment is her beautiful delivery during the haunting 'Reena', a song enhanced by a dreamy solo by Menario. It is a perfect example of sometimes less is indeed more. 'Vision', another ballad, comes a very close second. 'Secret Place' toughens things up somewhat matching an Industrial undercurrent to a killer NWOBHM-inspired riff while 'Dawn Of Crisis' moves through a myriad of moods and themes to bring the album to a dramatic close.

'Transposed Emotions' is a hugely promising debut album from SR and for a new band they display a maturity that many only achieve after several releases. If Secret Rule can build on this impressive base then the next couple of albums will see them as serious contenders.

Mick Burgess

SERPENTINE – 'CIRCLE OF KNIVES' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

Every band talks – or perhaps the better word would be complains – about the "sophomore slump" syndrome. For some, however, it is the one that comes next that turns out to be the much bigger challenge. The third effort that has to be up to standards of the previous two and a step forward towards their own style and maturity... both at the same time! One can only imagine it must be even harder to rise to such a challenge with line-up changes happening simultaneously. However, the U.K. act Serpentine have somehow managed to follow 2011's 'Living & Dying In High Definition' with a decent third album which was no doubt helped by the input of Gary Hughes (Ten) who produced and co-wrote all the material. On this occasion it is neither Tony Mills nor his heir Matt Black that sings on 'Circle Of Knives' but Adam Payne, Serpentine's new lead singer who recently replaced Black.

It may be a different voice that fills the air and a different face behind the mic, but the band's style hasn't evolved much since the days of 'A Touch Of Heaven' or '...Definition'; it's still keyboard-laden, guitar-driven AOR/Melodic Rock embroidered with bombastic choruses. The only and obvious difference that is evident is that of Payne's relatively low-key voice. He's a singer perhaps not too suitable for songs in the vein of the band's older repertoire where he's required to hit all the Mills-esque trademark high notes, hence you won't find such here.

Other than that, it's just a solid AOR record – full of dynamic Rockers ('Season Of The Witch', 'La Tragedienne', 'Bound By The Strings Of Discord') and melodic mid-tempo offerings ('Forever', 'Where Does Your Heart Beat Now', 'Such A Long Way Down', 'Suicide Days'). As far as those infectious hooks that undoubtedly are the genre's trademark – 'The Hardest Fall' is perhaps the album's highlight in this respect, the title track being nevertheless very close. As for a heart-rending power ballad, another "must" in Melodic Rock, there is 'Bleed' with its rich lead guitar work and melancholic tone.

Apart from the line-up change, 'Circle Of Knives' is, in effect, a continuation to the previous two albums more than the album to mark any evolution in Serpentine's sound. But then one could ask "is any evolution necessary"? What the band offers for the third time is simply a handful of well-crafted AOR/Melodic Rock songs that are still embedded in the same aesthetics that are so eagerly utilized by the likes of Ten, FM, Casanova and of course Stage Dolls twenty five or more years earlier. It's nothing new perhaps but still enjoyable – and worth checking out if you're into Melodic Hard Rock.

Alexandra Mrozowska

STARSICK SYSTEM – 'DAYDREAMIN" *(Bakerteam)* MODERN/ALTERNATIVE

You could probably count the number of decent Modern Hard Rock bands from Italy on one hand and yet here we have a pretty decent one.

Featuring Marco Sandron – remember him from his brief spell in Eden's Curse? – 'Daydreamin" is a well-produced slice of Modern Hard Rock that faithfully straddles the ground between Classic Rock ala Guns 'N' Roses and the more Modern territory occupied by the likes of Taking Dawn and Burn Halo.

Running the whole gamut of accessible Metal cum Contemporary Rock is a neat trick; from the G'n'R rumbling of the opener 'Start Again', the frenetic TD-like 'Spit It Out', the Myles Kennedy plays Slash straight up Rock of 'Last Goodbye' or 'Back In Time', it's well written, musically descriptive and raucous enough to hold the attention.

Yes it may not be an original offering and it may not rate as highly as some of the genres more celebrated bands, but with Dave Donati's excellent guitar playing and Sandron's highly suited vocal delivery, this is certainly an album that more than holds its own with anything other than the top tier.

Mike Newdeck

SUPERSTITIOUS – 'RIDE ON THE STARS' *(Independent)* MELODIC ROCK

Up until a week ago I was only aware of two Melodic Rock/AOR bands from Brazil, Pleasure Maker and Auras (no doubt you guys/gals know others), so it was a pleasant surprise to receive 'Ride On The Stars' all the way from the land of beautiful women, football, nuts and... close shaves(!). Both the PM and Auras albums contained worthy material, but the difference in production was notable; the former was released on a lesser known label, whilst the latter found a home with the mighty Frontiers conglomerate. Superstitious, despite seeking adoption with a reputable label, have produced a stimulating album that sits somewhere in between.

Originating from Sao Paolo, this five-piece consist of Luis Wasques (vocals), Rodrigo Cordeiro (guitar), Daniel Mattos (bass), Flavio Gasperini (drums) and Lael Campos (keys). They cite Europe, Def Leppard, Treat, Mr Big and Toto amongst their major influences, and there are snippets of those bands, among others, on display here. Their self-titled debut was released in 2011 and Wasques recently informed me "we were forging our sound and there was (sic) strong tunes...' but the "...new album comes with a higher and mature level... musically it's way, way ahead of the first one". Unfortunately, I've not heard the debut but I can certainly share his positivity

TONK – 'RUBY VOODOO' *(MelodicRock)* HARD ROCK

Every now and again a band comes along, and despite having one of the most non-descript names in the business, they simply grab you by the collar (and your nether-regions) and make you sit up and take notice. Tonk is that band.

Hailing from Canberra, Australia, Tonk are a five-piece that, to be quite honest, possess not only a fine pair of shredders in Steve and Ben, but also a mighty fine vocalist in Jinx; someone who reminds the listener of a cross between Zak Stevens (Savatage, Circle II Circle) and a little touch of Drew Rose (Wildside).

For a debut album , Tonk have come up with nigh on a masterpiece of "in your face", riff heavy, bottom end heavy, powerful, meaty Hard Rock; the type Bad Moon Rising, Lynch Mob, Wildside and Lillian Axe all made careers from.

From the opening kick in the face of 'Pleasure And Pain' there is little or no let up as Tonk riff their way through a series of excellently written, powerful, chunky and above all hugely melodic tracks such as 'Snake Eyes' and the glorious 'Voodoo' which echoes LM in their absolute prime. I defy you not to admire the swagger that is stamped all over this, it's as infectious as infectious can be with no antidote in sight.

Just when you think it's safe to come up for air, even the slower paced 'Last Goodbye' pins you to the wall with its earthy delivery and powerful vocal line. When you think this possibly can't get any better 'End Of The Line' emerges from the speakers, blessed with a glorious melody and some serious shredding before the album run-in of the Punky 'Scene Queen', 'One Foot In The Grave' and 'Over The Edge' seal the deal, making 'Ruby Voodoo' a must have for any self-respecting fan of Hard Rock.

Reinventing the wheel it is not, however there are not many bands out there today playing old-school, riff-based Hard Rock that have ALL the tools to make it work like it should. Tonk have and do. As debut albums go, this is among the best you are likely to hear and the more you play it the more you will love it. It is pretty instant as it is, but on constant repeat it reveals a little more of itself on each play. Stunning album and every home should have one – yours too!

Kieran Dargan

regarding this sophomore release.

'Ride...' commences with a N.A.S.A. style countdown, which I feel is a tad unnecessary and certainly doesn't compliment the title track that immediately follows; but what a track it is! An opulent AOR melody with superb guitar tones and a pulsating rhythm section that underpins Wasques' vocals, which are impressive, varied and ooze emotion – imagine White Widdow, Angels Or Kings et al and you wouldn't be far away. This edgy AORness occupies the majority of the album; 'The End Of The Age', 'Black Cat Heart', 'Have You Ever' and 'My Lady' are impressively penned and executed songs that will soon grab you by the Brazil nuts (so to speak)!

Call it variation, playing what you feel is right or not knowing your true direction, Superstitious are not totally subservient to AOR/Melodic Rock – 'Naughty Dancing' and 'Errors Of My Way' have a vintage Deep Purple ambience, and even the Synth Rock of 'Goodbye' (initially the runt of the litter), becomes rather endearing after several spins. Finally the two ballads, 'Phoenix' and 'Freedom Cry', proficiently display their softer side.

The talent and commitment from all involved is undeniable, but Cordeiro deserves a special mention; his unpretentious riffs and searing solos are rather tasty and never outstay their welcome. 'Ride On The Stars' is certainly a sterling effort, and with the support of a prominent label, they really could be taking a ride on the stars.

Dave Crompton

SUPRALUNAR – 'A NEW HOPE' *(Dead End Exit)* ROCK

Supralunar are a Swedish band who are definitely what you could term "groovy". This is groovy in the sense of the seventies, when The Sweet were cool and The Darkness were just twinkles in the milkman's eyes. They are a fun band who make music to enjoy, to sing along with and, let's be honest, it's nice to hear such a thing every so often… unless it's utter rubbish of course.

'A New Hope' (bonus points to the guys for the 'Star Wars' reference) is not rubbish. It doesn't slide into greatness either but certainly contains a lot to enjoy. Although their basic intentions mirror those of TD, Supralunar are not all that similar; their music is less histrionic and heavy, a mixture of seventies Glam and sixties Pop. The closest comparable band I can think of is Redd Kross who have a similar Pop vibe and are also a lot of fun and with this comes an obligatory Cheap Trick comparison.

'Right Vs Wrong', nestled at the tail end of the album, has a wonderful, high energy Pop vibe to it as does the opener and single 'People Like Us' (check it out on YouTube). Vocalist Petri Tuulik has a voice that suits the music nicely and the solid production brings out the best in each instrument which sounds great, especially in headphones.

'A New Hope' is one of those albums that might just sneak in under the radar, slowly gathering fans as it goes. It's lively, fun, well made and full of catchy Retro style hooks. When Supralunar hit it right, they hit it hard, and as a result have delivered an album of solid Rock peppered with simple Pop sensibilities.

Alan Holloway

TALON – 'FOURPLAY' *(Escape)* HARD ROCK

Talon's first album was, in most people's eyes, a bit of a success story. It gained both critical and fan approval across the board and saw the band playing at The Gods Of AOR Festival. From that humble start, the band continued to grow but seemed to be dogged by the "ever changing vocalist" syndrome.

They recruited Chandler Mogul (Outloud/solo) as their singer for their second release when original vocalist Michael O'Mara left the band. Mogul's work with Outloud however started to take up most of his time, so Talon then recorded their third album, simply titled 'III', with Line Of Fire's Shawn Peleta. Which happily brings us full circle to new album 'Fourplay' where again we see another change in vocalists, with O'Mara making his welcome return to the Talon family.

And it's this return that seems to have revitalised Talon's music. They were always a very good Hard Rock act but 'Fourplay' is leaps and bounds ahead of their other albums. Not just in the quality of the musicianship but especially in the song-writing department.

'Spun' kicks things off in fine style with a strong vocal hook, big chorus and a superb guitar solo from guest guitarist Tim Pierce and from this auspicious start the band keep hitting us with potent Hard Rock gems. 'Sin City Sister' is all swagger and attitude, 'Holly Would' is a groove-laden track with a great O'Mara vocal whilst 'Set Me Free' is an up-tempo Rocker that has a wonderful riff and guitar solo and sees O'Mara once again having a ball.

One of my personal favourites is the Country-ish Rock of 'I Don't Wanna Cry'; an acoustic-based song full of great band performances which goes to prove that Talon have more than one string to their bow. Lastly, there's the glorious Melodic Rocker 'Ride Em' High' with its strong chorus and great harmony vocals. This really is one of the standout moments on 'Fourplay'.

It's been a blast listening to this album from Talon and it shows that we still have bands out there who know how to write albums full of melody, great musicianship and above all else great songs. Nice to have you back guys.

Ian Johnson

VON HERTZEN BROTHERS – 'NEW DAY RISING' *(Spinefarm)* ROCK

I've been a fan of the Von Hertzen Brothers since catching them at the inaugural High Voltage Festival, and have watched amazed as insufficient numbers have taken notice to put this band where they deserve to be.

In their native Finland they headline festivals and it's simply a factual matter when they are referred to as "Finland's Number One Rock Act". It's just taking the rest of the world a while to catch up.

'New Day Rising' is their sixth studio album. It's the follow-up to 2013's well-received 'Nine Lives', which spawned a "Prog Anthem" award for the exquisite 'Flowers And Rust'. Herein, I suspect, lies the key. For while Prog is no longer a dirty word, and modern Prog happily embraces all manner of musical styles, the label still has the potential to shackle or limit cross-over appeal. The VHB have always been innovative and routinely surprised and delighted fans. But while they are "Progressive" in the true sense of the word, at heart they are a Rock band.

'...Rising' finds the band in punchy form, determined to break free from the shackles without compromise; the emphasis is very much on the song. Fans will find all elements of the VHB sound intact and given full expression – but with fresh purpose and focused intent. Out, for this album at least, goes extended brooding and lengthy compositions. In comes the power of the title track, the monster riff of 'Trouble', the more focused and pointed emotion of 'Black Rain', the quirkiness of 'Dreams' and 'Love Burns' and the hooks of (potential single) 'Hold Me Up' and 'You Don't Know My Name'.

There's no let up in quality from start to finish. Ten crisp tracks and forty seven minutes of exciting and exemplary Rock on an album that, arguably, saves its best until last. This album consists of ten short, sharp shocks given a modern production and real kick courtesy of Grammy-nominated Garth Richardson (Biffy Clyro, Rage Against The Machine) and the superb Randy Staub (Metallica, Alice in Chains) mix.

'...Rising' is not so much a departure as a re-focusing, much in the spirit of The Pineapple Thief's 'Magnolia'. Prog tried it before when Pallas, IQ and Twelfth Night signed with major labels and tried to hone their Prog sensibilities to more mainstream commercial effect. The Von Hertzen Brothers are more likely to succeed. They already had all the bullets; now they have an album that fires them without asking too much of the casual listener.

'New Day Rising' is a creative, inventive and powerful album from a creative, inventive and powerful Rock band. This could, and should, be the album that does it for them.

Michael Anthony

TERRA NOVA – 'REINVENT YOURSELF' *(MelodicRock)* AOR

Having reviewed Terra Nova a few times over the years, I have always had a soft spot for the clever AOR peddled by brothers Ron and Fred Hendrix. TN were, at one stage, hotly tipped to become one of the shining lights of the AOR scene. Unfortunately plagued by inconsistent output, not to mention the sporadic nature of their releases (an average five to six years between albums), for many they simply faded out of view. Their previous two efforts on Frontiers ('Escape' in 2005 and 'Come Alive' in 2010) failed to rescue them from the "remember them" file, and consequently many of us thought they were done.

Fast forward to 2015, with the now "almost traditional" five year gap maintained, and the band have returned with their seventh studio recording in the shape of 'Reinvent Yourself'; before you ask ladies and gents... yes the album title is indeed self-explanatory.

Reinventing a twenty year old band isn't easy but they have pulled it off quite nicely. The opening trio of 'Meltdown', 'Shadow Man' and 'Broken' are worth the money straight off; each song is typical of the band and an example of "hi-tech" Euro AOR with layer upon layer of backing vocals, swirling keyboards and plenty of guitar high in the mix. Let's face it, it's TN we're talking about and a leopard does not change its spots.

There is however the odd clunker such as the ballad 'Jenna' which is simply awful beyond belief and annoying similar to Kool And The Gang's 'Cherish'... really, I mean really? Aside from this obviously failure of quality control, there is MORE than enough here to redeem the album; even the cheesy 'Rock Army' (despite the questionable title) is a fist-pumping little ditty, the kind that Kiss used to do so well. Title track 'Reinvent Yourself', 'Expectations' and 'Reincarnation' have more than enough about them to maybe show the Scandi-kids that they don't have sole rights to snappy, up-tempo, "hi-tech" AOR.

All in all, apart from the aforementioned clunker, Terra Nova have come back with a seriously strong album, one that will evoke many memories of their heyday of the mid/late nineties. But the band have also proved beyond doubt, even after some the below par releases, that form is temporary yet class is permanent. Welcome back guys, but please don't make us wait five years for another one!

Kieran Dargan

THE 69 EYES – 'THE BEST OF HELSINKI VAMPIRES' *(Nuclear Blast)* HARD ROCK

In their Finnish homeland The 69 Eyes are pretty much superstars. Three number one albums and a further three which have charted at four or higher being impressive stats by anyone's reckoning. With this two disc, twenty-eight track "Best Of" it's extremely easy to hear why. Forming some twenty-six years ago, the early days of T69E found a band searching for their own true identity. A reliance on the sound of the U.S. Rock acts of the 1980's and fellow Fins Hanoi Rocks were a feature of debut album 'Bump 'N' Grind' and its follow ups, 'Motor City Resurrection' and 'Savage Garden', none of which have any songs featured here.

However a rethink saw influences of a more Gothic persuasion begin to filter through; The Cult and Sisters Of Mercy becoming evident. The early days were never quite consigned to the coffin though, the end result being an oddly seductive blending called Goth 'n' Roll! That may sound like an odd concoction but as T69E matured, so their sound took on a form of its own that revealed obvious inspirations, yet still sounded like no other. This is Dark Rock, baby!

A song apiece from 1997's 'Wrap Your Troubles In Dreams' and 1999's 'Wasting The Dawn' (both title tracks) illustrate the hybrid years, Gothic undertones wrapped in a more mainstream approach. However with 'Blessed Be' the Goth 'n' Roll sound was found and T69E were thrust into the Finnish mainstream. Four tracks each from the band's subsequent six albums jostle for attention here; whether it's the extremely Billy Idol-like 'Crashing High' (from 'Paris Kills'), The Cult meets Type O Negative of 'Perfect Skin' (from 'Angels') or the tongue in (a corpses) cheek of riff-heavy 'Dead Girls Are Easy' (from 'Back In Blood'), the chant-along choruses, crushing guitars and cloyingly catchy keyboards refuse to leave your mind. Singer Jyrki 69 lands his voice with such easy authority, it's impossible to ignore the drawling baritone he employs to seduce all within earshot.

The 69 Eyes' most recent album saw the light of day in 2012 and 'X' is represented by 'Tonight', a more readily accessible slice of clipped beats and melody, and 'Borderline', an almost Country Goth 'n' Roll choice. Along with 'Lost Without Love' (released as a single when this album was first issued in (just) Finland a couple of years back hence this being technically a new release), these songs highlight a departure from the tried and tested into an almost Symphonic Goth Pop sound. Factor in as well the previously "iTunes-only" 'X' bonus track 'Rosary Blue', where Mexican tattoo artist/TV personality Kat Von D croons alongside Jyrki, and to the credit of this collection – the early U.S. Rock sound aside – 'The Best Of Helsinki Vampires' does a superb job of showing the different aspects of an eclectic act at their peak. What comes next is anyone's guess.

Steven Reid

THE AMORETTES – 'GAME ON' *(Off Yer Rocka)* HARD ROCK

Never judge a book by its cover (unless it's "Mein Kampf" perhaps); it was easy for me, when seeing this Scottish all-female trio, to think of Kittie or Crucified Barbara and demean it as a hammering Metal album with little regard for fun before the laser had even touched the plastic.

What a fool. This second album is full of sassy attack, chock full of souped up riffs and bursting with brilliance. There is no such thing as contemplation here, but if a rush is what you want, you can surely have it, but with a nod to craft and a Heavy Rock tradition.

'Hot And Heavy' is so simple, glorying in the riff and unleashing an elastic solo. This is undeniably sexy and entirely on their own terms, no conforming here; the riffs are dripping with old style Hard Rock attitude. 'Son Of A Gun' has only this, nothing else to distract and if some of these tracks are a little too simplistic (possibly 'Give 'Em Hell'), there is always a slightly different offer, something with more care, still Sleazy and grimy but low slung and with a love of the music that has gone before ('Daddy's Got Money' particularly). In Gill the band have a guitarist who mainlines that love in every note.

Reminiscent of a pissed off Young Heart Attack, they are bound to be compared to Girlschool and that would be such a shame, The Amorettes deserve their own room to breathe, this short, sharp punch in the ribs with a leery grin surely demands that.

Just enjoy it, they certainly do.

Steve Swift

THE BARNUM MESERVE – 'THE BARNUM MESERVE' *(34D)* ROCK

The Barnum Meserve are a three-piece Pop Rock band from Nottingham with this, their debut self-titled album. It's been two years in the making, following the release of 2 EPs in 2011 and 2012. I want to say that the band have had almost too much time to work on this album. It's almost as if it's been repeatedly tweaked and touched-up and ultimately removed any guts and soul it might have had.

'War Games' builds slowly, like a tide, but it never reaches a high-point yet seems too long to act as an introduction to the album. 'Open Up Your Eyes' demonstrates the sparse texture the band use throughout the album; they make good use of this, managing to fill out the whole sound and reaching good climatic effect in choruses. However, from 'Colours' you genuinely feel like you're stuck in a loop of one long song. The tracks are all very similar in tone and key. The band builds toward big climaxes in the songs (think Hozier or Nine Inch Nails but without the catchiness and rhythm) but they lose their effect when they all sound the same. Similarly, the soaring, uplifting sounds – especially in the backing vocals – become a bit predictable.

'Half Mast' started out more promisingly; the key gives it overtones of a Bond theme tune but unfortunately the opening mood is where the similarities end. 'Without Numbers', too, started out with a punchy, almost Funky rhythm but the song quickly falls into the old loop of vocals trying to capture emotion and a crescendoing piano part. Pianist and vocalist Leon Wiley has a similar affected and fragility-type quality to his voice as Sixx A.M. front-man, James Michaels. There's nothing bad about his voice but it's always utilized in the same way, over the same notes.

The whole album is produced cleanly and the musical performances are tight. There's evidence of some original writing in quirky drum beats, great harmonies from the backing vocals and some musical sparks in general. But they're few and quickly get lost and it leaves the album overall feeling bland.

Sophie Brownlee

THE CRUNCH – 'BRAND NEW BRAND' *(Independent)* ROCK

It's second album time for The Crunch, and the word "difficult" certainly doesn't seem to enter into the equation, as 'Brand New Brand' is a worthy successor to 2013's debut 'Busy Making Noise' which garnered a rave review in this very publication.

TC were and are a pleasant surprise, and much more than the sum of their parts; this is especially impressive when you consider those parts included former members of bands like The Cockney Rejects, Sham 69 and The Clash. Instead of a raucous Punk Rock album full of the word "oi" and a maximum of three chords, TC deliver a hard but fair record with a heady mixture of "in your face" Rock and thoughtful slower tunes.

For this album they welcome backing singer Idde Schultz as a full-time member, and she gets to shine as lead vocalist on standout Rocker 'Solid Rock Steady'. Elsewhere, regular vocalist Soren "Sulo" Karlsson (Diamond Dogs) puts on a fine display, his voice is both melodic and rough and perfectly suited for the album.

Opening track 'Lonely Beat Of The Heart' thunders out like The Alarm's '68 Guns' and sets the tone for much of the album. It's catchy, Hard Rocking and gives the impression of a band that may have been in the gutter but were always looking up at the stars. Lead single 'Neon Madonna' is worth a mention as it shifts sideways into Reggae territory (like many old Punk bands used to do), as is the rather lovely ballad '25 Hours A Day'.

'Brand New Brand' is one of those albums that it's very easy to go on about, listing the merits of each track like a poet plucking flower petals and telling someone the many ways in which they are loved. In the end, The Crunch have just gone and produced a perfect follow-up to their debut, instilling the values of classic Punk Rock combined with a melodic energy that is hard to resist.

Alan Holloway

THE DARKER MY HORIZON – 'ACQUIESCE' *(Independent)* MELODIC ROCK

Over the years I've been a big fan of the U.K. act Sacred Heart and I always felt, for whatever reason, that they were never given a fair crack of the whip. Unfortunately, due to the lack of strong record company backing, the band broke up and it looked like that was that. SH's main man Paul Stead had other ideas however and over recent months he seems to have been bitten once again by the song-writing bug and, with new band The Darker My Horizon, he has come charging back with a brand new album 'Acquiesce'.

The first thing you notice as you play the album (and Stead has mentioned this to me) is the production, which (I consider) for the first time really showcases what he and his compatriots are truly capable of. The guitars, and especially the vocals, sound more beefed up and intense than anything I've heard from Stead before. The next thing you'll notice about 'Acquiesce' is that every one of the fifteen tracks that make up the album has a massive hook-line, ones that you'll be able to sing along to after just a couple of listens.

With fifteen songs, the question is where to start? Firstly, there is the infectious, summertime, feel good romp that is 'OK', a song that has a classy riff and a big chorus which draws you in every time you hear it. Two more selections worth highlighting are the glorious semi-ballad 'Summer Time', where Stead shows that he's no slouch in the vocal department, and 'Paradise' with its forceful guitar riff and hook to die for; the latter really showcases what TDMH are all about. Finally there's one of my personal favourites, namely the brooding 'There's Gotta Be', which is a tale about a woman with a broken heart looking to just make it through another night without her lover. The lyrics in this song are intelligent, yet they have a dark edge to them and if you have ever loved in your life, you'll understand where they are coming from; it's a really great song.

Now it would be easy to keep on writing about the other wonderful songs that you can find on 'Acquiesce', space I'm afraid doesn't permit this. So instead, I will close out by stating that I think The Darker My Horizon are a band who are good enough to take their place alongside the other new U.K. Rock acts that have released albums recently. If you've liked anything by In Faith, AOK or Night By Night, then you can do little wrong in buying this great slice of British Melodic Rock.

Ian Johnson

THE GENTLE STORM – 'THE DIARY' *(Inside Out)* PROGRESSIVE

This project isn't your usual everyday type of album or selection of music. 'The Diary' is a new album by The Gentle Storm that is split over two discs with the same track listing on each side, but with the songs themselves performed in different ways. This is a reflection of the band's name with disc one being 'The Gentle' and disc two being 'The Storm'.

As the title would suggest, the first disc is made up of the gentle approach with a more acoustic, ethereal and laid back style to the music/musicianship whilst the second disc, unsurprisingly, takes the more aggressive tact with electric guitars replacing the acoustic ones and increased orchestration to create a more dramatic effect.

It's a very clever idea and which side of the coin you will prefer will be decided entirely by personal taste. The mastermind behind this concept is Arjen Lucassen (Ayreon, Star One, Guilt Machine) who, as usual, plays almost everything in sight whilst again using the talents of his many musician friends such as Ed Warby on drums, Joost van den Broek on keyboards, Johan Van Stratum on bass as well as Marcela Bovio (Stream Of Passion) on backing vocals to flesh out the sound. The trump card however is his choice of vocalist for the project; Anneke Van Geirsbergen is just wonderful on this release and it's her heartfelt, emotion-drenched and plaintive vocal's that are truly the focal point of this record.

As for the actual music, given the projects main man is Lucassen, this is of course a concept album about how a husband and wife keep in contact with each other via a series of love letters whilst the husband is away on a two year sea voyage; their correspondence form the basis for the eleven tracks. The lyrics are, I suggest, an integral part of this release's magic and need to be read for this album to be fully understood because what is going on throughout the album cannot be taken just as a piece of music. It is much more than that and it could (potentially) be one of Lucassen's best works to date. Everything about the songs, the music and the musicianship is just about perfect and it's so obvious that this has been such a labour of love (for both Lucassen and van Geirsbergen) that pulling out a track from here or there would do them and the album as a whole an injustice.

The best suggestion I can make is that you listen to both discs and bathe in the beauty that has been created on each of them before you make any judgement on this album. It truly is a beautiful musical suite, with an intriguing idea behind it's execution, but only the individual listener can truly decide whether they like it or not. For me personally, it's another masterstroke from Lucassen but that is something for our esteemed Fireworks readers to decide for themselves.

Ian Johnson

THE JEFF HEALEY BAND – 'LIVE AT THE LEGENDARY HORSESHOE TAVERN 1993' *(Eagle)* BLUES/SOUL

It is seven years since Jeff Healey left us but there have been a number of posthumous recordings to remind us of his talent. In December 1993, Healey and his band were completing their tour in support of the (at the time) recently released 'Feel This' album, which culminated in several nights at the Horseshoe Tavern in their hometown of Toronto. This show was recorded on the last of those nights.

Healey is backed, as usual, by bass player Joe Rockman and drummer Tom Stephen and, as you might expect, the sound is raw but filled out nicely by the addition of a keyboard player (Washington Savage) rather than an extra guitarist and two backing singers (Mischke and Touco). The set features a number of Rock/Blues standards alongside some of the material from 'See The Light', 'Hell To Pay' and '...This'. ZZ Top's 'Blue Jean Blues' has great passion and power and the extended guitar solo moves from soulful individual notes to blurry intricacies without losing any momentum.

The mid-set acoustic section includes outstanding versions of 'That's What They Say', 'You're Coming Home' and 'Angel Eyes'. The songs take on a different intensity yet retain their identity and highlight Healey's versatility with the guitar. 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' showcases yet more great guitar work but I could have done without the vocal histrionics from the backing singers that intrude near the songs conclusion. Everything is redeemed with a stunning eleven minute cover of BB King's 'The Thrill Is Gone' and this closes proceedings in elegant style.

The restoration and mastering by Eliot Kissilef has given the mix great clarity. Each instrument has the definition you would expect from a studio project and this just emphasises how tight a unit the band were. The vibrancy of the performance has been captured perfectly and if you pour yourself a cold one and find a bar stool, it is almost like being there in person. Healey's emotional playing and singing dominates the songs and there are many self-indulgent passages but I guess that is what everyone who likes this kind of music expects anyway and when the quality is this high, there is not really much to complain about.

If you are familiar with some of the Jeff Healey live albums that have been released in recent years then there will be no surprises here. If you're a fan then this is certainly one to add to the collection and another reminder of a sadly missed talent playing at his peak.

Dave Bott

THE TOI – 'WATER INTO WINE' *(Sushi Roll)* MELODIC ROCK

The Toi are a young an upcoming trio from Glasgow, formed in 2011 by three school friends, singer/guitarist Paul Healy, bassist Andy Carr and drummer Stevie McLay with their name originating from an old Glaswegian word for a gang. They already have a big-name

WE ARE HARLOT – 'WE ARE HARLOT' *(Roadrunner)* HARD ROCK

I was sent this album with the promise from our Reviews Editor that this would "get me up and air-guitaring" – he certainly wasn't wrong!

Seemingly a few years in the making, Anglo-American We Are Harlot (or simply Harlot for short) are a "super-group" of sorts. Though initially viewed as a solo album project, vocalist Danny Worsnop left U.K. Metalcore band Asking Alexandria as it became obvious Harlot was growing into something much more when Worsnop joined forces with former Sebastian Bach guitarist Jeff George and Revolution Renaissance drummer Bruno Agra; bassist Brian Weaver (Silvertide) joined later. Roadrunner Records came on board and Harlot's first ever live performance was 2014's Rock On The Range Festival.

Citing Aerosmith and Van Halen as inspirations, Harlot's sound harks back to the glory days of eighties Stadium Rock 'n' Roll but combined with a thoroughly contemporary commercial Pop/Punk appeal that brings to mind the likes of Foo Fighters and The Offspring. It offers a raucous and "in your face" approach that's infused with an insane sense of melody and achieving the perfect balance of heavy and catchy. Worsnop's Metalcore past occasionally resurfaces with old-school grunting and growling, most notably on 'Denial', 'Flying Too Close To The Sun' and the utterly brilliant, riff-driven, blistering Rocker 'One More Night', but these are few and far between and not enough to disrupt the enjoyment. George is also given the green light to shred to his heart's content – which he does in spectacular style but without overplaying his hand.

The Hard Rocking 'Dirty Little Thing', 'Never Turn Back' and 'Love For The Night' rub shoulders comfortably with the more melodic singles 'Dancing On Nails' and 'The One' (the latter accompanied by a great fun video) and the summery sounding 'Easier To Leave', while the raucousness nature of the bulk of the album is offset by 'Someday' and 'I Tried' – two ballads that wouldn't sound out of place on a Hinder album.

A good ol' Rock 'n' Roll album with an exhilarating element of fun scattered throughout, a million miles away from what you would expect from this vocalist. Roadrunner are anticipating big things from this band, it's easy to see why.

Ant Heeks

fan and collaborator in The Darkness guitarist Dan Hawkins (the album was recorded at Hawkins' studio and produced by his resident engineer Nick Brine) and a 2013 single of the week in The Sun – okay, it's not exactly Kerrang! or NME but it's no mean feat for a relatively unknown band.

Musically speaking, this album is straight-forward, lively Melodic Hard Rock, fairly simple and uncomplicated, which makes it instantly accessible with nothing overly deep and meaningful lyrically but the sort of thing that most people can relate to. However, it's this facet combined with the fantastic melodies that come at you from all sides that really grabs your attention, as they manifest themselves into your consciousness and enable you to sing along, even on your first listen. Healy has a smooth style that is very easy on the ear, very similar to Fahran/ex-Serpentine singer Matt Black – in fact much of TT's output reminds me of Black's earlier outfit Invisible Idols – while his guitar solos are fluid and memorable.

The aforementioned single 'Get On It' opens the album in a bouncy Pop Rock style and later on 'Till The Morning Comes' follows a similar direction with a chugging riff. 'The One' displays a tougher style with a harder-edged riff and searing solo yet it's 'Come Alive', the mid-tempo 'I'm Still Crying' and the sublime 'Staring At The Sun' that are the real attention grabbers thanks to their enormous hooks and sing-along choruses.

The final three tracks demonstrate a more mature sound and the future potential of TT. The title track 'Water Into Wine' is darker and gloomy yet still very melodic whilst the ballad 'Cold In The Night' is a foray into more Bluesy territory with a multi-tracked soaring chorus and classy solo (it's a number that could have passed for a Queen hit-single back in the day). 'Down By The River' closes the album in fine style, a powerful and dramatic story-telling, seven minute-plus epic complete with an extended guitar workout at its finale.

With youth on their side and a knack of writing a catchy tune, The Toi could well be a name to watch out for.

Ant Heeks

THE VINTAGE CARAVAN – 'ARRIVAL' *(Nuclear Blast)* ROCK

Close your eyes, dream of a kaleidoscope world, turn up the volume, press play and you are immediately transported back to the early seventies. From the strains of the opening track 'Last Day Of Light' it is obvious that this is more "vintage" sounding endeavours from The Vintage Caravan. The album retains that very 1970's feeling courtesy of producer Axel "Flexi" Árnason who also produced the last album. 'Arrival' was recorded in a studio set-up in an old ballroom somewhere in a secluded Icelandic fjord. I can imagine that songs like 'Monolith' and 'Babylon' were recorded with the volume being pushed to the maximum and the paint peeling off the walls with the Northern Lights flashing across the night sky. The album also features another sensational Psychedelic front cover that has been designed by American artist David Paul Seymour.

The song-writing sessions for 'Arrival' started almost immediately after the release of their sophomore album 'Voyage', back in the summer of 2012. I had the privilege of reviewing the latter back in issue #62. The young Icelandic trio of Oskar Logi Augustsson (vocals, guitar), Gujon Reynisson (drums) and Alex Orn Numason (bass) continue to produce music beyond their tender years. I think that if the bands Cream, Emerson Lake and Palmer and Black Sabbath had a lovechild it would be TVC.

'Eclipsed' would have fitted perfectly on the previous album whilst 'Shaken Beliefs' and 'Crazy Horses' are up-tempo numbers with a highly infectious groove, especially the latter where it is virtually impossible to stay still whilst listening. 'Innerverse' starts off as a brooding ballad but kicks into overdrive with some fearsome Hammond Organ that would have Keith Emerson raising his eyebrows. 'Carousel' even features a bass solo that is very apt given the fact that I sit here reviewing the album in a week where we lost two great bass players in Mike Pocaro and Andy Fraser. The epic 'Winter Queen' brings the album to a storming conclusion.

The band themselves best describe their new album; "it's a bit darker, a bit heavier and a bit more melodic but definitely in a good way". I would agree with latter completely but would also add that 'Arrival' is not as instantaneous as 'Voyage' and I do miss the quirkiness of tracks like 'M.A.R.S.W.A.T.T' and 'Expand Your Mind' from the last album. That said, this is another fantastic trip back to the early seventies.

The Vintage Caravan continues to be the best legal high on the market!

Mark Donnelly

THEO – 'THE GAME OF OUROBOROS' *(Generation Prog/Big O)* PROGRESSIVE

I broke one my cardinal rules with this album, I read the PR blurb before I'd actually listened to the music. Consequently I was less than enthusiastic after learning that Jim Alfredson, the man behind Theo, is an acclaimed Jazz Hammond Organ player. Just the thought of Jazz makes my blood run cold, however I needn't have worried because Alfredson wanted to try his hand at Prog and he's produced an album that ticks that box and been one I have enjoyed a great deal. There are some Jazzy motifs but nothing that's going to frighten the horses, let alone me. He's gathered around him bassist Gary Davenport, Kevin DuPree on drums and guitarist Jake Reichbart.

The title track puts me in mind of Steely Dan during their early stages, moving into sections that are redolent of RPWL before concluding with splendidly melodic guitar (courtesy of guest Zach Zunis) and organ solos. 'The Blood That Floats My Throne' has a bleak ambient opening which builds until a circular keyboard pattern takes control; again RPWL are a touchpoint. The track suddenly bursts out on a flurry of drums and towards its close some monumental organ and Mellotron sections brings the work of Rick Wakeman to mind.

'Creatures Of Our Comfort' has a Reggae style beat that makes me think of SD again, particularly on the verses, while the processed vocals (not something I like) on the chorus are unusually effective. This track features a very strong vocal arrangement.

A lovely piano refrain sets the tone on 'These Are The Simple Days', the theme develops as other instruments join in. It's a composition in the singer/song-writer style while a delicious fret-less bass gets its moment in the spotlight. The arrangement is terrific with the opening theme closing the song following a splendid synth solo.

'Idle Worship' is a thirteen-minute epic which hits Emerson, Lake & Palmer territory initially before heading off in all directions and styles, all of which are very neatly sewn together to make a cohesive experience; without a doubt it's the Proggy-ist of the tracks on offer. The album closes with another epic, 'Exile', which again is a song that builds from a gentle beginning; once more they deliver strong themes and refrains and meld the different styles into a pleasing whole. This includes a lengthy instrumental passage which wouldn't be out of place as a Genesis outtake from their mid-1970's period. Another guest lends a hand here with Greg Nagy providing chunky rhythm guitar and backing vocals.

Initial concerns aside this has turned out to be a nice surprise and an album well worth investigating.

Gary Marshall

THUNDERHEART – 'NIGHT OF THE WARRIORS' *(Killer Metal)* HARD ROCK

A power trio in the grandest tradition, Thunderheart are three seasoned musicians who came together in 2013. 'Night Of The Warriors', their debut, is a full-sounding slice of straight forward Hard Rock with blistering guitar riffs. The three men in question are Willy Gascon on guitars/bass, Ricardo Lazaro who pounds out the rhythms on the skins and vocalist Javier Pastor. Founding members Gascon & Lazaro are ex-members from Spanish band Steel Horses (and been involved in other influential bands from Spain) while singer Pastor hails from Madrid and was the guitarist for Wild.

'...Warriors' is made up of ten hard-fisted Rockers that grow in intensity as we Rock through this release. A very tight group musically, Thunderheart creates a fluid pounding bottom end that enables flourishes of guitar brilliance that touches upon the highest levels. Each song is a true Rocker in the first degree and you will not find a ballad in sight!

Pastor's solid vocalisation keeps everything strong, powerful and interesting. 'Concrete Jungle' and 'Killing My Fears' display his strength and sense of harmony. As for the drumming, Lazaro just keeps nailing down that rich and solid foundation with amazing runs and speed! The music is ultimately motivated by high energy riffing with Gascon's guitar work fast, melodic and, in some places, simply soaring to the highest peaks. His bass licks are equally fine and drives along with the beat king in perfect sync.

'Night Of The Warriors' is a very powerful debut; it just keeps building with every track better than the previous. A solid sound (no holes bared if you will) and one that can no doubt be delivered live in just the same amazing way! These three musicians make their instruments and the vocals work and combine to generate some very interesting takes on the songs – together creating a unique Hard Rock sound.

A power trio that is both worth listening to and seeing live; the group are planning showcase dates sometime in the spring, and having heard this album, they will no doubt be filling those halls with a ballsy Hard Rock sound that seems so effortless! Be prepared to be in awe, with both their display of energy and talent!

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

TODD RUNDGREN – 'GLOBAL' *(Cherry Red)* ROCK

Todd Rundgren, everyone's favourite wizard and true star, has released yet another solo album. Entitled 'Global', it continues his recent habit of one word titles for his original material albums (e.g. 'State', 'Arena' and 'Liars'). Also, carrying on his career trait (which is a blessing – artistically and a curse – commercially), this album is a bit different from all the others. In this case, the style is electronic-based; heavy on synthesizers and not too much guitar. To be honest, it veers far closer to Pop/Dance Music than Rock and so out of all the albums in his canon, it is nearest to 1993's 'No World Order'.

As for the songs themselves, the album commences with the raucous 'Evrybody' (note it's spelt that way), a great opener which gets your attention with its repetitive and hypnotic chorus. The album is, on the whole, upbeat but the more introspective songs (still Techno-influenced though) work well; in particular 'Rise' and 'Fate' with their layers of synths and pounding electronics. World Music is covered with 'Holyland' replete with a chugging mantra and half spoken vocal.

Lo and behold, lurking at track eight, there is a top drawer Rundgren song in 'Soothe'; although there is still no sign of a guitar solo, it is clear that Rundgren has retained his mojo with such a classic song in the vein of the Utopia classic 'Mated'.

Rundgren, although best known as a balladeer/Soft Rock king and Rock Guitar God, also

has a penchant to being a bit Funky – demonstrated on the aforementioned 'Liars' album and throughout this album; for example 'Earth Mother' includes a Rap and a vocoder bit thrown in for good measure.

Like all his albums, 'Global' offers more than the average; Todd Rundgren has put a lot of thought into this release and he clearly still has a lot to offer. Maybe his next venture will bring him back to the piano-based ballads of his solo career back in the 1970s?

Rob McKenzie

TONY MILLS – 'OVER MY DEAD BODY' *(Battlegod Productions)* HARD ROCK

The second solo album from Tony Mills sees him taking a similar but different path regarding his solo work. If you're expecting Shy or TNT part 2, then you likely to be disappointed; whilst he retains all the hallmarks of his previous outfits, 'Over My Dead Body' takes a slightly harder road.

Opener 'Time Won't Wait' bears the hallmarks of 'Operation: Mindcrime' era Queensryche, not just vocally but stylistically. 'We Should Be On By Now' once again treads the tried and tested melodic path with plenty going on including counter melodies, massive layers of backing vocals and even an orchestral arrangement which drags this slightly into Melodic Prog territory.

'No Love Lost' veers into far more familiar territory with a chorus to die for and a killer guitar solo. It amazes me that with a history and track record as long as Mills', he seems to be finally finding a style which not only showcases the power and range of his voice but finds the perfect solution musically and straddles both Shy and Siam works.

'Bitter Suite' is different; I'm not sure you would call it straight A Cappella but there is certainly a large degree of it and the odd robotic voice and a suggestion of a Monastic influence for good measure – cleverly done and totally unexpected. 'Northern Star' is built on the back of staccato riffing guitars and is a more traditional "fist in the air" rocker which again highlights Mills' vocal ability alongside a beautifully subtle keyboard melody.

'4 In The Morning' is a contender for "Track Of The Year" by anyone's standards; total Melodic Rock heaven with soaring vocals, multi-layered backing vocals with beautifully innocuous keyboards behind a massive riff – rarely have I ever heard Mills deliver so wonderfully. If '...Morning' wasn't enough, 'Somewhere In London' is straight out of the eighties and ranks right up there with Shy's 'Brave The Storm'. Yes it is THAT good and it'll leave Melodic Rock fans doubtlessly wetting themselves upon hearing it and justifiably so.

Shall I go on or simply say rarely, if ever, does an artist come up with such an album full of wonderful material (especially for a solo album), but Mills has. Aided and abetted by the wonderful Robert Sall and even pulling in world famous producer Neil Kernon on bass, Mills has proved beyond doubt that the term "formerly of Shy" no longer matters and based on this, he is more than capable of standing on his own two feet as a solo artist.

This album is magnificent all round, new and fresh as well as old and clichéd in equal amounts with the sole winner the listener. Bloody marvellous!

Kieran Dargan

VARIOUS ARTISTS – 'IMMORTAL RANDY RHOADS: THE ULTIMATE TRIBUTE' *(UDR)* ROCK

In 1980, when the blonde pocket rocket that was Randy Rhoads hit the 'Blizzard Of Ozz' stage running with 'I Don't Know', it was difficult to explain what it was like seeing him perform for the first time. We've got used to the various riff-meisters and shredders over the years but this Classically-trained guitarist who merged this with his own Heavy Metal style was one of the first Neo-Classical kind.

When Rhoads died in a stupid flying accident thirty-three years ago (to the day as I write this) the Rock world were shocked to the core. The sense of loss was not only for the young life cut tragically short, but the loss of talent and the potential for that talent was huge.

So many guitarists that came after cited him as an influence that it's not surprising that they would want to put together a tribute. The brainchild of Bruce Kulick, 'Immortal Randy Rhoads – The Ultimate Tribute' was recorded and produced by him at his own studio. Bass for most of the album is provided by Rudy Sarzo with the vocals supplied by Tim "Ripper" Owens, Serj Tankian, Rhoads' brother Kelle and Chuck Billy. The guitar contributions read like a "Who's Who" of the great and the good; Tom Morello, Jon Donais, Alexi Laiho, Doug Aldrich, Bruce Kulick, George Lynch, Dweezil Zappa, Joel Hoekstra, Gus G., Brad Gillis, and Bernie Torme.

The idea behind the album is worthy but (and I'm pretty certain none of the performers would really argue with me or be offended by this) the problem is, it just isn't Rhoads. I was lucky, I saw him several times and he was a unique force, he had a charisma that just can't be recreated. For me, this is not so much a tribute as a celebration of a life by his friends and as such it is a solid album. Owens does a fine mash-up of Rob Halford and Ozzy Osbourne and, in my opinion, of all the vocals his are the ones that work best on the tracks. Gillis' 'Suicide Solution' captures the riffiness of Rhoads while Gus G. gets the feel of 'Goodbye To Romance'. Without doubt for me, and by far, the best track on the album is Torme's version of 'Flying High Again'; out of all the covers he manages to capture the essence of Rhoads, but of course this is my personal taste and others can (and I'm sure will) disagree,

'Immortal Randy Rhoads – The Ultimate Tribute' is an interesting collectible for obsessive Rhoads fans or for fans of the featured musicians, it's well produced and it's heart is in the right place but it just ain't the "Immortal One" himself.

Helen Bradley Owers

WINDSOR DRIVE – 'WINDSOR DRIVE' *(AOR Heaven)* POP ROCK

Here's a conundrum for ya; when is an AOR Heaven album not an AOR Heaven album? Easy one really, since this is a review of Windsor Drive, the answer is obviously "when it's a WD album" and the self-titled effort from these four Wisconsin youngsters.

Unless you are a teenager who thinks Snow Patrol, Fun and Keane are "Rock music", you're not going to find much here to inspire or even enjoy that much. The music is inoffensive, and there are some catchy choruses and neat tunes, but its all so balls-less that you want to smack them over the head with a Stratocaster and turn all their amps up to eleven.

It's easy to appreciate the synth-heavy Indie Pop of 'Wide Eyed At Midnight', for example, but it ain't and will never be, "Rock music". Nothing ever gets past a jog, and you might as well be listening to 'Somewhere Only We Know' and 'Chasing Cars' on a loop for all the variety. Vocalist (and keyboard player) Kipp Wilde has exactly the right sort of voice for the music he's doing, and it's all put together with care and attention, but it's just so bland; for the most part I could feel my brain dribbling out of my ears and escaping quick just in case a John Lewis advert came on.

I can't see this appealing to many readers of Fireworks, although their tweenage daughters might like it (if they haven't been properly brought up with Journey and Night Ranger, that is). If Windsor Drive were an entry in the 'Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy', they'd definitely be filed under "mostly harmless".

Alan Holloway

YATIN SRIVASTAVA PROJECT – 'THE DREAM PLAYS IN REVERSE' *(Independent)* PROGRESSIVE

Amazing where a bedroom recording project can lead you – or is it? There must be hundreds of musicians who, like Yatin Srivastava, started off making music in the comfort of their homes which led to greater things; in this case a full-blown Progressive Rock/Metal project. Based in New Delhi and gathering together a cast of musicians from the Indian independent music scene, the project sees light as a five track "EP"; however no question of being short changed as it actually runs as long as the latest AC/DC album.

Openly admitting to being influenced by the likes of Steven Wilson, Porcupine Tree and Karnivool, the music falls neatly into the Progressive niche; a labelling strengthened by the fact that there's a conceptual thread running through it all – a typically Prog-styled story of a character who enters a dream state totally the opposite of his reality and it consequences.

With a suitably dreamy opening allowing the music to evoke the main idea behind the concept, there's a sudden charge into 'Fascination' which instigates a healthy dash of heaviness. All chunky blocks of guitar evolving into a slab of what people might call Post Rock urgency; it's a terrifically atmospheric track which pulls no punches and starts to introduce the guitar as the driving force behind the songs. Discerningly positioned guitar solos start up in 'Unexplained' which feature Takar Nabam taking the second of a pair of epic solos.

The title track is an eleven minute journey through a plain of driving guitar and sound-bite samples on a backdrop of electronic washes of sound, all allowing some experimentation and time to develop the musical ideas. Again, the weighty guitars play a big part alongside some reedy organ during the impressive final section

The final track 'Home' has been flagged up as a track which showcases the album, giving a flavour of the record as a whole with moody washes of keyboards and complete with another stunning solo this time from Pranav Pahwa – another strong feature of the writing – making solos which aren't there for the sake of it but making them count.

Srivastava himself takes on the bulk of the music plus the engineering, mixing and mastering duties – a tongue in cheek suggestion that he's the Indian Steven Wilson – and it's great to see some established Rock coming out of India and hitting the spot. For those who prefer their Rock more song-based, this exciting collection is something a bit more diverse, placing more emphasis on the instrumental aspect and is none the worse for it.

Mike Ainscoe

YOUNG AMERICAN DOUBLE ACTION REVOLVER – 'YOUNG AMERICAN DOUBLE ACTION REVOLVER' *(Independent)* BLUES/SOUL

This duo from Chicago specializes in Lo-Fi Blues that owes more to the Blues of the Mississippi Delta than the Blues of the Windy City. There are the scuzzy riffs of Junior Kimbrough and back porch Rocking of R.L. Burnside. The addition of harmonica to their sound brings that Country Blues vibe of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee to much of the music too.

Young American Double Action Revolver's John Liggett and Brian Mickey take a riff and drive it onwards, giving you that Box-Car rhythm that influenced a lot of early Blues. 'Love Don't Make No Sense' and 'Don't Be Down' have the measured Boogie ethic of the late, great John Lee Hooker and 'You Wouldn't Believe Me' recalls those Hooker and Canned Heat collaborations that resulted in some of the best Boogie Blues ever. Here Liggett's harmonica follows the guitar groove like CH's late Al Wilson did so well. His voice is a rough approximation of their Blues influences but he doesn't quite have the world weary, life experience feel and depth of say Hooker or Son House though.

There are other influences that widen their sound. 'Been So Long' is a deceptively simple Indie Country Blues number that brings their sound more in line with the modern trendy Blues of the Black Keys as does 'Let Me Do That For Ya' which goes for a deliberately sloppy, loose and limbre groove. The laid back drinking song 'Bar Stool Blues' has the infectious swing of Jimmy Reed and lyrics that are close to that of the great Bluesman's lifestyle. The spit and sawdust production enhances rather than diminishes their sound. The electric riffs and Punk drumming are the only indications that this isn't a 1940's or 1950's Blues record.

Carrying the torch from America's great Blues artists, this duo does a decent job of keeping the Blues alive for the bar band audience of the U.S. and the album listening audience everywhere.

Duncan Jamieson

ZODIAC – 'ROAD TAPES VOL. 1' *(Napalm)* HARD ROCK

I've reviewed the last two releases from this Classic Rock band from Germany, and I seem to remember mentioning they had a great "Retro" sound and a lot of energy. Even if I dreamt writing that review, this clearly is the case as their new live album proves.

'Swinging On The Run' is the sound of a band that are tight, talented and confident. The recording is excellent with each instrument easily detectable, the vocals clear while the mix retains that live vibe that is so difficult to replicate in a studio.

'Free' has more of that timeless Classic Rock riffing with a driving back beat, while 'Holding On' grinds its way into your head. The eerie 'Cortez The Killer' gives the band license to roam as they weave their way through a jammed ending before the assault of 'A Bit Of A Devil'.

There are a few other extended cuts, particularly 'Rock Bottom Blues' and the fifteen minute finale of 'Coming Home', seeing the seventy-five minute show cover ten songs in total. It passes quickly though, with very little of the material outstaying its welcome.

If you haven't encountered Zodiac before, I'd suggest one of their studio albums first. If you own one or more of those, this is a strong addition to what is quickly becoming an impressive back catalogue of well performed Classic Rock.

James Gaden

RE-ISSUES

ANATHEMA – 'FINE DAYS: 1999-2004' *(Music For Nations)* PROGRESSIVE

Music For Nations – the independent label that, back in the day, launched or sustained many a Hard Rock, Metal and, occasionally, Prog career – is back! And what better way to celebrate than with the re-issue of a "book-set" of re-mastered versions of Anathema's Music For Nations period albums, namely 'Judgement' (1999), 'A Fine Day To Exit' (2001) and 'A Natural Disaster' (2003).

Given the importance of the packaging, artwork and assorted extras to a re-issue of this nature, it astounds me that reviewers can be sent a download of the audio only. Consequently, it's hard to comment on the all round quality of the package or the value and insightfulness of the new liner notes provided by Dom Lawson and the band. Similarly, while a bonus DVD (cleverly entitled 'Were You There' – a play on the title of a track from 'A Natural Disaster') is included in the set, I'm unable to comment on its content. A great shame, as the band's involvement in, and endorsement of, the project will have set fans' expectations high.

In liner notes I do have, however, penned by guitarist/song-writer Danny Cavanagh for 2011's 'Falling Deeper' album, he notes: "I always find the statement "Anathema's music has changed beyond all recognition" to be something of a myth. Sure, the way the music is performed and produced has changed and grown immeasurably but the heart of the music, the melody and harmony, the structures of chords that pull at the heart strings, remains the same as ever, to me at least".

Certainly with the perspective of time, the three albums included in this collection can be seen as pivotal in Anathema's transition from a Death/Doom and Gothic Metal band (as they are often described) to the modern and emotive Progressive Rock outfit they have become.

'Judgement' is, perhaps, the most straightforward album in a trilogy that sees each offering growing in richness and complexity. It's pretty immediate for an Anathema album, having a natural, if gentle, momentum and a smooth flow. Indeed, before they've even had time to take stock, listeners are picked up by compelling opener 'Deep' and pulled along through 'Pittless', 'Forgotten Hopes' and others to the abrasion of the title track and the stunning 'Don't Look Too Far'. The latter features the guest vocal of current member Lee Douglas, who appears briefly on all three albums. Alongside fellow founding members Danny and Vincent Cavanagh (vocals/guitars/keyboards and lead vocals/guitars respectively), Lee's brother John Douglas is back on the drum stool after temporarily absenting himself for 1998's 'Alternative 4'. The line-up is completed by Dave Pybus on bass.

'...Exit' offers most to fans already familiar with Anathema's back catalogue, containing as it does a track omitted from the previous release (the rousing opener 'A Fine Day') and a changed running order. This allows the band to present (for the first time) the album they feel they should have released initially. The line-up here is augmented by former Cradle Of Filth keyboardist Les Smith. Highlights for me remain original opener 'Pressure' – now at the heart of the album – and 'Looking Outside Inside', a powerful track combining edgy guitar with intense emotion. The latter now features towards the back end of the album, ensuring that '...Exit' keeps kicking and wriggling nearly all the way through. Arguably, while the original album grew increasingly sombre and melancholic as it progressed, the new running order gives it a better balance. (And for anyone wondering, the "chickens" and hidden track after 'Temporary Peace' are retained.)

'...Disaster' is a bit more trippy and, perhaps, the closest in sound to more recent albums. It's also the album that reunites the third Cavanagh founding member, Jamie (bass), with his brothers. There is some exceptional material here. 'Balance', for example, builds from warm bass and keyboards to an altogether Rockier proposition with Electronica embellishments. 'Closer' milks the Electronica influence for all it's worth – a cool groove that many will regard as the album's standout track. 'Pulled Under At 2000 Metres A Second' Rocks hard, while the album highlight for me is Lee Douglas's beautiful vocal on the title track which, with the benefit of hindsight, provides a taste of things to come.

While the "book-set" appears to offer exceptionally good value for money, vinyl buffs will be pleased to hear that all three albums will also be re-issued individually as separate vinyl/CD packages.

Musically, 'Fine Days: 1999-2004' is a solid collection that fans of latter day Anathema would be well advised to explore. Together, the trilogy of albums presented here make the case for the growth and evolution (rather than revolution) of the Anathema sound. For anyone who wants to understand the journey Anathema have been on, and the transition they've made, these albums add vital pieces to the jigsaw and are an essential part of the Anathema story. What's more, each album unquestionably contains at least some material that does, indeed, "pull on the heartstrings" in ways that more recent fans of the band will both recognise and admire.

Michael Anthony

COLOSSUS – 'DRUNK ON BLOOD AND THE SEPULCHER OF THE MIRROR WARLOCKS' *(Killer Metal)* HEAVY METAL

If you're into NWOBHM, then you'll come to this as if it's a long lost classic from the beginning of the 1980s. It's authentic sounding but in fact it's neither from the 1980s nor Britain. Colossus are from North Carolina and this record is actually two EPs; 'Drunk On Blood' from 2009 and 'The Sepulcher Of The Mirror Warlocks' from 2012 welded together. They work well together and make for a strong cohesive album.

Influenced obviously by the likes of Iron Maiden and Judas Priest, this gallops in places like a horse with its tail on fire with great guitar work from a three-pronged guitar attack. Sean Buchanan's voice is clean and while not as mercurial as either Rob Halford or Bruce Dickinson, he does a good enough job whilst also adding an American twang to the proceedings.

Colossus manages the difficult job of sounding authentic without plagiarising. This is the sound of Metal before the big four stepped up and took Metal down a harder direction and spawned the multitude of Metal sub-genres that exist today. Here there are "manly" songs of swords and battle. 'A Year Later (There's Still Meat Left in the Skull)' has a slower yet more epic quality than some of the faster tunes. This song slightly reminded me of Ilium. 'Stoneburner' is about weapons of mass destruction which further compounds the "Retro" feel as it conjures up those concerns of the 1980's Cold War era. 'Jihad, Jihad' reminds you though that, at least lyrically, this is a band operating in the today's world. This is another track that has an epic feel with its Eastern-influenced intro. The standard across the material is consistently good and the wall of guitars found here is best heard at ear bleeding volume. The songs have some decent hooks without ever reaching the "classic" status of their influences.

The band's promotion makes it known that Colossus have a sense of humour, but this ain't Steel Panther. Some might argue that the genre is faintly ridiculous anyway but beyond the slightly over the top cover art (something a fourteen year old boy would design for an album cover) and a title like the aforementioned '...Skull', it's not parodying the genre but wallowing in it. NWOBHM fans should hack off the arms of anyone who stands between them and this record.

Duncan Jamieson

ELF – 'ELF' *(Cherry Red/HNE)* HARD ROCK

A band far better known for what its members would go on to achieve than its own endeavours, Elf were the first Hard Rock home of Ronald Padavona… or Ronnie James Dio as we would come to know and love him. 'Elf' was the outfit's first album and with the production duo of Roger Glover and Ian Paice (Deep Purple) at the helm, great things were expected.

Having morphed from The Electric Elves, into The Elves and then the singular Elf, the band had already forged ahead through tragedy, their original guitarist Nick Pantas dying in a car accident that would find Dio receiving one hundred stitches and keyboardist Doug Thaler badly injured. Shocked but determined to continue, Thaler moved to guitar, bringing Mickey Lee Soule in on keyboards, with drummer Gary Driscoll and guitarist David "Rock" Feinstein completing the line-up. However by the time this debut was recorded in Atlanta, Elf had slimmed to a four-piece (Dio handling bass duties), with Thaler heading to pastures new.

Recording was swift, Dio nailing nearly all of his vocals on the first take, the rest of the album completed in just over a week. The results made for a surprisingly accomplished record; keyboards as prominent as Feinstein's guitar and Dio's majestic voice. Soule was a keyboard player with the undoubted ability to Honk your Tonk and it is this playful piano flavour which infuses much of the album, and differentiates it from the many Hard Rock outfits that were beginning to burst through in 1972. However whether the almost Meat Loaf-like 'I'm Coming Back For You', Rocked up Ragtime of 'First Avenue' or swaggering Bar Room romp of 'Love Me Like A Woman', it's no surprise that it's Dio's voice which makes you sit up take notice. However it's the slow and beautiful 'Dixie Lee Junction' where the singer and his band mates really make a lasting mark.

Two less convincing albums would follow, before Dio, Driscoll, Soule and bassist Craig Gruber would join Richie Blackmore in the first incarnation of the mighty Rainbow, while Feinstein enjoyed success with his underrated band, The Rods. In the excellent liner notes, featuring contributions from Feinstein, Soule, Glover, Paice and

MISS BEHAVIOUR – 'LAST WOMAN STANDING' *(AOR Heaven)* MELODIC ROCK

'Last Woman Standing' is the highly acclaimed sophomore album that it is being re-released with two bonus tracks by the aptly titled AOR Heaven. This re-release (hopefully) is due to high demand and being aimed at those fans that have just discovered the band via last year's impressive 'Double Agent' album (see my review in issue #65). Many will be familiar with the album already but for those that are not, this is another glorious slab of Melodic Rock/AOR from Scandinavia; Sweden to be exact. This was also the first album to feature the exceptionally impressive vocals of Sebastian Roos.

I had only recently been revisiting this album when my Editor sent me the new re-released version to review. I had forgotten what a fantastic record it was, being packed full of eighties, AOR-influenced, Melodic Rock gems featuring equal amounts of guitars and keyboards courtesy of Erik Heikne and Henrik Sproge respectively. It brings to mind "classic" bands from the era like Giuffria, House Of Lords and a personal favourite in White Sister.

The album won the Melodic.net "Best AOR Album of 2011" with twenty-three percent of the votes beating the likes of Journey, Work Of Art, Night Ranger, Toby Hitchcock and The Magnificent. The album received fantastic reviews in all the important record publications including our own; Phil Ashcroft raved about it back in issue #44.

The ironic '1988' sets the bar high but the incredible standard is maintained throughout the whole album. 'Cynthia' was considered one of the best songs of 2011 and 'Till We Meet Again' is a fantastic ballad that first aired on Swedish radio to four hundred thousand listeners.

The album also contains a couple of guest musicians; Roland Grapow of Helloween and Masterplan fame features on the epic 'Perfect War' and Kajsa Berg duets on the grandiose title track 'Last Woman Standing' where Heikne and Sproge also duel it out with their solos. 'Taking Hostage' and 'Emergency' (standard song title for any aspiring AOR band) are personal favourites and pure AOR Heaven (pun intended).

The two bonus tracks were written in 2011 with the then new members Magnus Jacobson (drums) and Niclas Lindblom (bass); both are still in the band today and real quality additions to an already near-perfect album. The first, 'Run 2 You', is a Houston-style AOR tune featuring a great solo from Heikne whilst the second track is the bombastic 'True Man Show' that first appeared on the MelodicRock.Com Volume 10 compilation 'Inside My Head'.

If you somehow missed this album the first time round, do yourself a favour and pick it promptly. Whilst we still have Sweden, AOR will never die!

Mark Donnelly

studio engineer Rodney Mills, Glover states "I still can't understand why it [this album] wasn't a huge hit". The chance to re-appraise 'Elf' over forty years later comes to the same conclusion, however considering what might not have happened had this album received the success it deserved; maybe we should be grateful. Hardly as vital as his work with Rainbow, Black Sabbath, or indeed Dio, Elf were still a hugely overlooked act and to hear them at their best, this is the album you need.

Steven Reid

MOTÖRHEAD – 'OVERKILL', 'BOMBER', 'ACE OF SPADES' *(Sanctuary/BMG)* HEAVY METAL

I'm one of those old enough to remember the start and finish (?) of the phenomena known as NWOBHM. I'm sure that most of you will know many of the bands that started their illustrious (or not) careers during those glory years of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Iron Maiden, Saxon, Diamond Head, Angel Witch, Raven etc were all part of this truly British Rock experience. However there is another band that I would suggest pre-dated the NWOBHM era but in the end found itself being one of its driving forces; they were (and are) the real God Fathrockers of the genre and their name is Motörhead.

Now you can get your hands on these wonderful "Deluxe Re-Mastered Editions" of Motörhead's back catalogue starting with 'Overkill', 'Bomber' and 'Ace Of Spades'. Now those amongst you who have an historical knowledge of Rock music will already know the names of the three men who made up this Metal Juggernaut; Messers Ian "Lemmy" Kilmister, "Fast" Eddie Clarke and Phil "Philthy Animal" Taylor. At this juncture it is worth pointing out that no matter what you or I can say about this legendary band, it has already been said plenty of times. So my ramblings aren't going to be an in-depth exposition on the overall history of the band. Instead I'd like to give you my opinion of these re-issues from a fan's perspective.

In 1979 when Punk was busy destroying music, these three men decided to give a much needed shot in the arm to Rock 'n' Roll and recorded the seminal Metal album 'Overkill'. If you're old enough to remember buying this record, you will likely also remember that from the very second you let the needle hit the vinyl, you were hit by that gloriously heavy, yet catchy riff of the album's title track. It exploded from the speakers, with a force much akin to being hit by two tonnes of British Bullock on full charge, and from that moment on you knew that you were in the presence of greatness. Okay they weren't "widdly diddly" virtuoso musicians like many who were around back then, but they made up for it with their straight ahead, "in your face", raw musicianship unleashing an album full of songs that had a "FUCK YOU" attitude and a powerful wall of sheer musical brute force that drove them along.

The band however didn't sit on their laurels and followed up 'Overkill' with the more laid back (for Motörhead) 'Bomber' which many thought back then was a stop gap between their first and third albums. However re-listening to 'Dead Men Tell No Tales', 'Stone Dead Forever', 'Sharpshooter' and of course the amazing 'Bomber', you soon realize that this was no holding album but one with great songs and instead it showed a band who were easing into their role as the leaders of the new Metal movement.

Then we come to what is probably regarded (and rightly so) as one of the greatest Heavy Metal albums of all time; the one, the only '...Spades'. Everything about this album was a "Goldilocks" moment in time; everything was just right in every sense. When you look down the track-listing and see titles like 'Love Me Like A Reptile', 'Shoot You In The Back', 'Live To Win', '(We Are) The Road Crew', 'Jailbait' and of course that amazing title track, you realize just how important Motörhead were/are to the genre of Heavy Metal.

As with all the other "Deluxe" re-issues there's a plethora of bonus tracks including single b-sides, demos and live versions of various songs and extensive liner notes from Malcolm Dome. Plus there is the added bonus of some 'BBC In Concert'/John Peel/David Jensen sessions for your added pleasure.

In the end, it's really the albums themselves that are the reason for wanting these "Deluxe Re-Masters; each one an important milestone in the History of Rock music and I've enjoyed every minute I have (re) spent in their presence. I hope you do too.

Ian Johnson

SAXON – 'HEAVY METAL THUNDER' *(UDR)* HEAVY METAL

This new double-disc set contains one previous offering that originally saw the light of day in 2002. An eight-track version was also included with the 2001 'Killing Ground' digi-pack. It's made up of classics such as 'Strong Arm Of The Law' and 'Never Surrender', with the latter benefiting from a more powerful guitar approach due to the fact these are quality re-recordings.

Obvious anthems like '747 (Strangers In The Night)' and 'Wheels Of Steel' are so familiar that the originals with all their nuances will always be the superior versions to any Saxon fan. However 'Motorcycle Man' and 'Crusader' capture a more natural live sound that was missing from the originals.

The only disappointing song for me was 'Dallas 1PM'; I felt some of the dynamics, due to the omission of the original news reports of President Kennedy's assassination, were lost.

The second disc is a twelve track live show from Saxon's 2014 Bloodstock appearance. No doubt due to the bands lower spot on the bill, the majority of the songs on offer are what would be termed as the "hits", with only 'Battalions Of Steel' from 'Into The Labyrinth' and 'Sacrifice' from the album of the same name being the exceptions. Dave Mustaine (from Bloodstock headliners Megadeth) joins the band on a spirited version of 'Denim And Leather' which has the man firing off some tasty lead breaks. The quality of the recording is very high and you get a real feel of the atmosphere of the performance at Bloodstock.

This is a nice little package, something for both the diehard and casual fan.

Ray Paul

SECRET SPHERE – 'A TIME NEVER COME: 2015 EDITION' *(Scarlet)* POWER METAL

An Italian Symphonic Power Metal act formed by guitarist Aldo Lonobile back in 1997; as contemporaries of the likes of Labyrinth and Rhapsody, Secret Sphere are quite rightly now considered elder statesmen of their domestic scene... if not the whole of mainland Europe. Snapped up on the strength of their 1998 'Between Story And Legend' demo, to date they've released seven studio albums of bombastically overblown Power Metal culminating in the intoxicating 'Portrait Of A Dying Heart' a couple of years ago.

Widely lauded as one of the genre's hidden gems on its initial 2001 release; sophomore album 'A Time Never Come' has over the years been used not only as their benchmark, but as a litmus test for the legions of acts following in their footsteps. Mixing together elements of Angra, Fates Warning and Helloween (as well as a nod towards classic Queensryche), its sonic canvas depicted a dramatic, ever changing, musical landscape punctuated with histrionic crescendos and thought provoking troughs.

Long out of its original print run, increasing demand prompted SS to consider a limited Japanese market re-run, but that soon snowballed into something much more substantial. With a rejuvenated line-up gelling around vocalist Michele Luppi for the aforementioned '...Heart', the original plan morphed into the current version of SS completely re-recording '...Come' to put their own stamp on it.

Now, whilst I can see it as a useful tool for bands wrestling back control of the rights to certain songs from a former record company, on the whole I'm not a huge fan of re-recording previous material. The cynic in me is always suspicious of the motives – let's face it, on the whole it's a fairly quick, easy and cheap way of extracting a few more shekels from your existing fan base – preferring instead to see artists take the moral high ground and pour their collective hearts and souls into something new.

That said, from time to time, the "re-imagined" treatment can breathe new life in to an old set of songs and to their credit, that's exactly what SS have done to a large extent. A lot of that has to be down to Luppi; his emotive vocals adding a distinctly different hue to those of predecessor Roberto Messina on tracks such as 'The Mystery Of Love', 'The Brave' and 'Lady Of Silence'. Additionally, the background melodrama, which always underpinned the original, has been teased out even further to give the whole production a bold, far reaching dynamic feel.

If you loved the original this will enhance those feelings further. If it passed you by, this is a great reinterpretation of a pivotal album that helped push Italian Metal from the lower leagues in to the top flight.

Dave Cockett

SWEET – 'NEW YORK GROOVE PLUS' *(Angel Air)* ROCK

Released originally in 2012 under the guise 'New York Connection', this Angel Air re-issue, titled 'New York Groove Plus', found U.K. Glam legends Sweet offering up a selection of cover versions with (sometimes loose) links to New York. The motivation behind the album was simple and honest; Sweet wanted to show just how strong the line-up of Andy Scott (guitar), Tony O'Hora (keys, vocals), Pete Lincoln (bass, lead vocals) and Bruce Bisland (drums, vocals) was, but didn't see much point in recording an album of new material when, put simply, no one would buy it.

Cover albums may be, as the liner notes themselves put it, "as rare as mud at Glastonbury" but to be fair to Sweet, they understood exactly how to make the format work for them. Take a selection of eclectic tracks and just "Sweetify" them. Vital this album is not, but damn good fun it is and while I'm not sure I'll ever need to hear the band romp through the Dead Or Alive "classic", 'You Spin Me Round (Like A Record)' ever again (oh, there's a bonus live version as well?), the stomping version of the track where the album title was derived, written by Russ Ballard and made famous by Ace Frehley – 'New York Groove' – is Glamtastic even if it does have snippets of Jay-Z's 'Empire State Of Mind' running through it. Other mash-ups work equally well; 'Blitzkrieg Bop' incorporates Sweet's 'Ballroom Blitz' nicely while the surprising 'On Broadway', a hit for the likes of George Benson, somehow reminds of 'Love Is Like Oxygen'. Believe it or not, it's the best track on show!

Add in convincing takes on 'Join Together' (The Who), 'It's All Moving Faster' (Electric Frankenstein), 'Shape Of Things' (The Yardbirds'), the excellent 'Because The Night' (Patti Smith – written by Bruce Springsteen) and 'New York Connection' (which is actually a Sweet b-side track re-worked) and there's an undoubted and irresistible charm about this album. Is it essential? No, but 'New York Groove Plus' knows exactly what it is and that's throwaway fun that'll sure as hell get the party started. What else was Glam ever for?

Steven Reid

THE 69 EYES – 'PARIS KILLS', 'DEVILS', 'ANGELS' *(Nuclear Blast)* HARD ROCK

It would appear, with the release of 'The Best Of Helsinki Vampires' (featured in the New Releases section) and these three re-issues, that Nuclear Blast are determined to raise the profile of Finnish sensations The 69 Eyes. These three albums, 'Paris Kills' (2002), 'Devils' (2004) and 'Angels' (2007) are actually releases seven, eight and nine in the band's eleven album catalogue, and most notable for being their three consecutive Finnish number one albums.

In fairness 2000's 'Blessed Be' and its re-working of the Garbage hit 'Stupid Girl' into 'Gothic Girl', had set the scene for a band morphing out of Hanoi Rocks and Mötley Crüe clones into a self-styled Dark Rock or, should I say, Goth 'n' Roll act. However it was 'Paris...' which hit the dark-sweet spot, the thumping keyboard led 'Dance D'Amour' hitting the top of the Finnish singles charts. From a U.K. perspective, it's hard to imagine a swinging Billy Idol meets Sisters Of Mercy tune reining supreme over the Pop-fixated fare of 2001. Yet it set the tone for an album which somehow uplifts through deep, dank melancholy. Subsequent singles 'Betty Blue' (which borrows heavily from Abba beneath its tough exterior) and 'Crashing High' (which steals so blatantly from Idol, you can almost hear its "rebel yell"…), both went Top Five. The rest of the album doesn't exactly let the side down, but it can be a directionless collection. 'Stigmata' provides a clear link to Gothic Rock through vocals which wouldn't be out of place on a "Glenn Danzig (Danzig, The Misfits) And Peter Steele (Type O Negative) Does Elvis" album while 'Still Waters Run Deep' repeats the trick in a less maudlin fashion.

'Devils' however simply bristles by comparison, shiny keyboards suddenly set free to add melodic punches and some scintillatingly eerie effects. Factor in that Timo-Timo and Bazie (I didn't make these names up, they did) are also let loose to lay down huge, commercial slabs of guitar to compliment the now more Idol-like vocals of Jyrki 69 and right from the opening title track, this album is a beauty. Through the huge sing-alongable keyboard splash of 'Feel Berlin', there's an amazing amalgam of styles on show. Huge 1980's keyboards jostle playfully against a Gothic overtone but there's also

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QUERCH!! RECORDS

Melodic Rock deep in its core and even the Pop nous of Roxette! In fact 'Devils' is full of shimmying, dizzying struts and pouts of similar style. Nobody bothered to tell 'Nothing On You' that it isn't The Cult, while 'Christina Death' could be Queensryche ploughing slowly and deliberately into TON! Four singles would come from this album, with the "hooks at the ready" 'Lost Boys' becoming the band's second Number One smash.

If 'Devils' was T69E at their most Gothically threatening, yet commercially beguiling, then 'Angels' was...well more of the same! As ever across all three albums, drummer Jussi 69 leads from the front as Archzie, his fellow rhythm killer on bass, throbs as though he's a thumb that's just been crushed under a mallet. The title track unbelievably ups the schlock horror approach, vocal wails and stabs of church organ set against explosions and grating guitars, while 'Never Say Die' is the album's most straight-up chart Rock attempt. However, it was the ghoulish, Rob Zombie-lite of 'Perfect Skin' that would provide T69E with their third Singles Chart topper. Deeper albums cuts still make their razor sharp mark; 'Frankenhooker' has the upbeat Sleazy chant its name suggests whilst 'Star Of Fate' displays a deep, passionate side seldom heard from this band.

All three re-issues come armed with a trio of extras; previous bonus and Japanese/American exclusive tracks are brought together while there's even a couple of (non-essential) exclusive re-mix/radio edits thrown in for good measure. However the real value comes in showing an act, not particularly well know outside of their own borders, at their best. The two albums which would follow would head off in a more atmospheric, less hard hitting vein and good though they are, it is these three albums, and especially 'Devils' and 'Angels', which show The 69 Eyes in their best, pitch black, light. Goth n' Roll baby – oh yeah!

Steven Reid

THE ALMIGHTY – 'BLOOD, FIRE & LOVE', 'SOUL DESTRUCTION' *(Spinefarm)* **HARD ROCK**

So Spinefarm Records have re-issued British Rock heroes The Almighty's debut album 'Blood Fire & Love' and it's follow-up 'Soul Destruction' and given them the "Deluxe Edition" treatment. To be fair these albums are essential purchases alone especially if you love attitude-spitting, hard-hitting, raw Rock 'n' Roll! Even if you already have the albums, getting a brand spanking new shiny version should be pretty much a no brainier. Forget the extras for one minute, the awesomeness of the original albums should be enough for you to part with your cash again. However, if you have yet to discover these British Rock classics, you're in for a delightful treat; get your biker jacket ready, you're going to need it. But as with all things concerning TA, they are best listened to at "maximum volume" whilst getting nicely inebriated, well enough to shout along and not give a poop about who might listening! TA can't be done quietly or politely, they give it to you loud, mean and they don't give a damn!

As already stated, these "Deluxe" versions are above and beyond "value for money" based simply on the merits of just the original album themselves. However, '...Love' does come with the much loved 'Blood Fire & Live' album which was released at the time because of the demand given by the band's rise to fame through the live circuit where they established themselves as an unmissable live act. The bonus discs are only really for those who need to own everything by TA; they mainly feature alternate or live versions of the songs from the main albums. That said, there are six b-side originals which, for those who don't have the singles, will be of the most interest here. Although I have to admit, as intriguing as these tracks are, it is obvious why these track were relegated to b-side status; they're still worth a listen to though. From the '...Love' bonus disc 'Thunderbird' has a typical TA anthemic style to it, 'Love Me To Death' is okay but easily forgotten and 'Good God Almighty' is an unusual number with a bit of a swing vibe to it, although essentially it's a Bar Room Blues acoustic number.

On the '...Destruction' bonus disc 'Bodies' is really tribute to the bands love of British Punk, lead vocalist Ricky Warwick always wore his love of Punk like a badge of honour and he is also a huge Stiff Little Fingers fan and this song feels like their tribute to the genre. 'Bad Temptation' actually starts like 'Wrench' from the band's 'Crank' album and even features a similar riff and 'Wild Road To Satisfaction' is a driven Rocker with a pretty cool chorus. The bonus discs don't really have the "wow factor" of other recent re-releases I have seen but as an overall product, these re-issues should be high on peoples "To Buy List" regardless.

Paul Woodward

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SHORT - SHARP - SHOTS OF - ROCK!

Steven Reid takes a look at new EP releases

Freddie Wolf is **EVIL**. No, let me rephrase that, Freddie Wolf IS Evil. He plays everything, writes everything and sang, well none of it. Instead ex-Artillery man Soren Nico Adamsen shouts in tune across this eight track, but less than thirty-five minute, mini-album. Evil's history dates back to Metal's formative days, with links to Rave-On Records (Mercyful Fate) and going all the way back to 1983. However 'SHOOT THE MESSENGER' is their first long-player… that happens to be quite short! 'I Could Be Your Hero' could be Accept in their prime while 'Keep It True' begins like it wants to be 'One' from Metallica before turning into a solid, mid-paced grinder. However 'Big Show' proves how difficult it can be to truly tinker with the tried and trusted, while the title cut adds a Punky edge that provides little joy. There's certainly no need to shoot this messenger but neither is there cause to get too excited by the Evil news he brings.

Throbbing Electro-Rock comes from this 'DEATH SHOWER SCENE', a three song stomp from **STARSCREAM**. Imagine Rob Zombie with 1970's Glam choruses and lyrics a load less schlock and you'll be halfway to 'Die On The Floor' and the title track. Throwaway in an utterly keepable sense, this trio are so catchy, you'll be visiting the clinic they only whisper about to remove them from your head…

Dutchmen **BLUEMINDED** certainly know how to grab the attention; and that's simply by providing four superb slices of melodic Progressive Rock. You'll find touches of It Bites, Arena, Credo, Galahad… and yet this self-titled debut sounds like none of them. There's a touch more AOR and Melodic Rock about these guys, while singer Rob Rompen has supremely golden tonsils. There's no point highlighting any of the four tracks on show, for they're all corkers and they all suggest Blueminded are one of 2015's must watch acts.

Now we all know that Blues Pills are taking all the Blues Rock plaudits right now, but if you're looking for foot-stomping, Female-Fronted Blues, then **LITTLE FOOT LONG**, are where you should be. Guitarist/singer Joan Smith is immense, her vocals wild yet controlled, her fret-work focused yet fiery as hell. Add in the keyboards of Jeff Heisholt and all that's left is for drummer Gavin Maguire to hammer it all in place. 'Heavy' is heavy on emotion but not so in execution, while title track 'WOMAN' simply bursts with vitality. 'The Worst' may be the best but the strutting swagger of 'My Word' steals it by a nose. Give LFL the right push and they'll be huge – and no pills in sight…

I nearly ran out of ink (Okay, this is typed on a computer thingamajig but you get my drift) jotting down the influences on the opening track to this self-titled EP by Wigan's **BIGFOOT**. Bad Company, Dio, Y&T, Electric Boys, Tyketto!?!? D'ya think these guys have a varied palette? Not to worry though, for who doesn't like hugely memorable choruses wrapped up in harmony vocals, hooks aplenty and a singer who's everyone from Danny Vaughn to Dave Meniketti via Ronnie James Dio and Rick Medlocke? Not convinced? Okay, I'll throw twin guitars, searing solos and rock solid rhythms into the mix and bang, you've got the instant sing along of 'Bitch Killer', the rousing Rock of 'Tie Me Down', the heart-string tug of 'Come Down My Way' and Slash-tacular riff that 'Another Shot At Paradise' suggests. I know it's only four tracks but if Bigfoot can maintain this standard across a whole album, then they're set to leave a massive (foot) print on the U.K. Rock scene.

The title may suggest something atmospheric and spooky but Northern Ireland's **CONJURING FATE** are here to hit hard with 'HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL'. Easy reference points are Iron Maiden or Helloween, but there's a grittier edge here and gigantic riffs that fall far more readily into an all-out Metal onslaught. The title track scythes viciously while 'Mirror Mirror' hammers home through a more considered barrage. Stormzone guitarist Steve Moore lends his muscle to 'Backwoods Witch', his darting solo matched ably by Phil Horner and Karl Gibson's six string exploits. If I was being super picky (and I'm that kind of guy) then the slightly rough and ready recording standards can sometimes leave singer Tommy Daly a little exposed on the high notes but otherwise his performance is spot on. No conjuring is required to seal the fate of this lot, they're debut offering is too assured for that.

I don't have to tell you that **BULLETPROOF ROSE** sound like Guns 'n' Roses, their name does that job for me. Slice in a razor's edge of AC/DC and the only shock is that this lot come from Cumbria! The name of the game on 'LOUD, HARD AND FAST' – where the title number sounds like Twisted Sister "Gabba Gabba Heying" with the Ramones – is rough and ready. Nothing is over thought, nothing is chiseled to death. The results are going to be too loose for some tastes and yet you just know this lot will be slap you round the chops good on stage. Solid first steps are vital for young bands and while socks have remained firmly on feet, there's enough here to at least toast the toes.

There appears no sign of the Symphonic Metal boom ending anytime soon, Europe is crammed with acts desperately hoping to be the next Within Night Temptation Wish. Willing to add their violin to this ever-growing orchestra are Slovenia's **SHADOWICON** and their mysterious 'SMOKE & MIRRORS'. All the expected elements are ticked from the list – soaring strings, bombast aplenty, thundering drums and rampaging riffs – yet the intricacy of the arrangements and multi-vocal parts show real promise. The outlook is more musically uplifting than dramatic, and in front-lady Ana Prijatelt Pelhan, ShadowIcon have a real beacon of hope. Slightly accented but crystal clear, this lass is more Soft Rock singer than Classical Impresario and it makes 'The Edge' and 'If I Was The One' a sultry joy. I know the wallets of the Symph-faithful must have miniature tumbleweed floating through them but the CD version of this six track EP comes with a bonus instrumental disc. Go on, sell yer furniture, you don't need it when you're head-banging!

Having conclusively proved with the 'Renegade' album that this band is no vanity project, the ex-World Motorcycling champ **TOSELAND** returns with 'HEARTS AND BONES'. Teaming up once more with producer/writer Toby Jepson (Little Angels), '...Bones' itself surprises by hitting like Alter Bridge, James Toseland's vocals more urgent than anticipated, while 'The Closer I Get' is equally exuberant, if a little more expected in execution. A surprising Rocked-up version of The Teardrop Explodes' 'Reward' is almost unrecognisable yet it works reasonably well. Cover version aside, this short blast easily matches the fantastic standard this band have already set. Hopefully album number two isn't far off.

Get the obligatory intro out of the way and Denmark's **SAVAGE MACHINE** illustrate how to bring classic NWOBHM values up to date. A bit of Iron Maiden here, a melodic push of Praying Mantis there and the threat of Hell all around making for a ghastly-good mix. Vocalist Troels Rasmussen reminds of a less crazed David Bower (Hell) but he's less demonic daze than full-throated roar. Rather than sing of devils and horns, SM take you on a trip 'THROUGH THE IRON FOREST', surprising with an ecological conscience. I doubt they'll save the planet but they do make a mighty racket. SM... savage sounds.

After a seven year wait, Sweden's **MARYS CREEK** returned last year with 'INCUBIC TWIN'. Why we're only hearing it now is anyone's guess. Yet here it is and it's a case of better late than never. Their debut, 'Some Kind Of Hate', was built around the idea of blending Modern Heavy Rock with the Swedish sense of strong melodies and, really, that also describes the five songs here perfectly. MC aren't afraid to let their guitars loose and yet with clever keyboards adding a constant hit of melody and vocals that could as easily be Andi Deris of Helloween as Tom S. England of Evergrey, the seemingly disparate marriage is a match made in heaven. 'Black Tie Suicide', 'Remission Of Sin' and 'Forever Lost' know how to get in quick and make a mark, while lingering long and growing stronger as they do so.

Hailing from the heart of the Black Country, **THE BLACK HOUNDS** take the traditions of that region and add their own twist. So alongside a sparkling eye for melody, hooks and groove, the 'LOVE AND DEATH' debut EP also hits hard and with a controlled aggression. This is Hard Rock with a nod to the past and a keen sense of the here and now. Vocals which straddle rich and pure, and down and dirty, guitars which marry melody and ferocity, and three songs which hit mightily while begging for repeat visits, is an impressive combination.

Ouch! Well, I never saw that coming! **CROWSAW** were known for a Bluesy, almost Jimi Hendrix style but 'KARMA' finds them morphed into a convincing Metal outfit. That a band can so believably about turn in under twelve months is admirable; 'The Answer' welding riffs that wouldn't be out of place in Zakk Wylde era Ozzy Osbourne to the dry attack of Metallica. Yet they intersperse that approach with refined, layered vocals and clean calling guitars as the concoction continues across both 'The Colours' and 'Believe'. All it takes is singer Rob Lomax to utilise his smooth voice to aggressive effect and I know I'm a believer.

Centred round guitarist Chris Buck and singer Sally Ann Evans, the cunningly named **BUCK AND EVANS** launch the three track 'LIVE AT ROCKFIELD'. Walking on the Bluesy side of life, fans of Aynsley Lister will love to do the 'Impossible', while 'Ain't No Moonlight' shines brightly. The closest comparison vocally for Evans is, believe it or not, Damian Wilson (Threshold), a theatrical clarity and vibrato running alongside superb tone and great power, while Buck is a serious guitar slinger, the grittier 'Screaming' showing another side to his excellent style. The Blues market is packed super tight right now but with power and focus like that shown here, BAE should go the distance.

Now this wasn't what we were expecting… Having done our homework (well, a quick squint at my Editor's review for their latest album, 'Somewhere Alive'), I was looking forward to a Deep Purple meets Iron Maiden standoff. However 'CHRONICLES FROM ANOTHER SEA' is an acoustic EP highlighting a different side to **TIPSY ROAD**. And what a side it is; similar to but not as unessential as the all-star Iron Maiden tribute act Maiden United, this is a keen clash of acoustic guitars, piano and cracking vocals. Underpinned by up-tempo beats and atmospheric interludes, 'Bridge Of Fire' and 'Another Sea' romp along at pace but also with plenty of poise. The motto, always expect the unexpected, definitely applies here, but in such a good way.

A quick EP preview from **EMPIRE OF FOOLS** finds their excellent 'DEVIL INSIDE' leaving a huge impression. It's no shock these guys have shared stages with Thunder, The Answer and BlackWolf; all three bands inspiration for this classy track and yet EoF stand on their own merits. A full EP is due later in the year…

MULTIMEDIA

IAN PAICE'S SUNFLOWER SUPERJAM – 'LIVE AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL 2012' *(earMusic)* ROCK

The Sunflower Jam started life as a private charity event created by Deep Purple's Ian Paice and his wife Jacky. The event was successful and this recording, taped in 2012, documents the second Jam, which was open to all.

The best thing about the Jam is seeing an array of great stars on the prestigious Albert Hall stage, all having a blast. The Temperance Movement kick things off with a spirited rendition of their track 'Ain't No Telling' before Sandi Thom comes out to try her hand at Julie Driscoll's 'The Wheels On Fire', backed on keys by original keyboard player Brian Auger.

Uli John Roth performs 'The Sails Of Charon' before we get to the more left field selections, which make the event such fun. You never know who is going to show up, and when celebrated tenor Alfie Boe takes to the stage, I wondered what he would choose to perform. I enjoy stuff from the Musical Theatre genre, where Boe is very comfortable, so he completely threw me when he decided to sing Led Zeppelin's 'Rock And Roll'! He did a very good job too, following it with a powerful version of Foreigner's 'I Want To Know What Love Is'.

Another great West End singer, Steve Balsamo, took to the stage to pay tribute to Jon Lord before delivering a brilliant version of Lord's 'Pictured Within'. Level 42's Mark King then picks up the pace with energetic takes on 'Something About You' and 'Lessons In Love'.

It was covers time again as Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson tries his hand at Thin Lizzy's 'Emerald' which was okay, but not nearly as successful as his impressive rendition of The Who's 'Behind Blue Eyes'. I often see the word "super-group" used in this magazine, sometimes tenuously to say the least, but there can be few better examples of the term than when Ian Paice sat at the drums, joined by Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones on bass and Queen's Brian May on guitar to back Dickinson for 'Black Night'. To prove it's a jam, May is enjoying the riff so much he keeps playing even as the rest of the group were winding up, prompting Dickinson to shout "This is the end, Brian!"

May welcomes another West End singer, Kerry Ellis, to the stage for a great duet of 'Since You've Been Gone', before Alice Cooper brings things to a close with 'Elected' and 'School's Out'. The stage is then packed for an all-star finale of 'Smoke On The Water'.

The accompanying audio version contains all of the above, while the DVD offers an extra track from The Temperance Movement and two acoustic songs from May and Ellis. It's a hugely varied, fun and entertaining show and well worth checking out.

James Gaden

JOE BONAMASSA – 'MUDDY WOLF AT RED ROCKS' *(Mascot)* BLUES/SOUL

The last two or three times I've done a review of a Joe Bonamassa project I've mentioned how ridiculously prolific he is, and here I am yet again wondering when the guy must sleep. The guitar hero, with Kevin Shirley at the production helm, has come up with another great addition to his expansive live canon.

The idea was to pay tribute to two Blues icons, namely Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, so Bonamassa has taken a selection of songs from each to make the 'Muddy Wolf' concert. Filmed at the truly spectacular Red Rocks, an amphitheatre set in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the show has a stunning look to it. Footage of Waters kicks things off before Bonamassa, and the amazing band backing him, launch into a ferocious rendition of 'Tiger In Your Tank'.

With a band that has the legendary Anton Fig on drums, Michael Rhodes on bass and experienced Blues player Reese Wynans amongst its ranks, you can't go wrong. Add in a second guitar from Kirk Fletcher to let Bonamassa rip in the solos, and throw in a trio of brilliant horns players, and you have a superb sound to let these great songs live again. Tracks like 'I Can't Be Satisfied', 'Stuff You Gotta Watch' and 'My Home Is On The Delta' are all received with rapturous applause. In fact, I've rarely seen a crowd so into a concert – with nine thousand people in attendance, Bonamassa proudly acknowledges it is his biggest crowd to date and one of the most appreciative – pretty much every solo and every song receive a standing ovation.

After the Waters set, footage of Wolf plays before Bonamassa launches into 'How Many More Years'. Well known tracks like 'Killing Floor' and 'Spoonful' are aired and I personally thought Bonamassa has seldom sounded better vocally, although my brother (who is a much bigger Blues enthusiast than me) felt the guitarist's voice wasn't suited to songs previously delivered by Wolf's gravelly rasp.

Bonamassa brings things home with a take on Jimi Hendrix's 'Hey Baby (New Rising Sun) and then dusts off a few of his own gems, such as 'Sloe Gin' and 'Ballad Of John Henry'. There are few more polished live performers out there and this latest Blues foray is another absolute triumph.

The DVD is bolstered by documentary film of Bonamassa and Shirley taking a trip to the famed crossroads mentioned in the song of that name, as well as a "behind the scenes" featurette. Also available on audio disc, it doesn't matter which format you prefer, if you're a fan of Bonamassa, you need this release.

James Gaden

SAXON – 'THE SAXON CHRONICLES' *(UDR)* HEAVY METAL

This double DVD is a re-release, and now includes a bonus disc entitled 'Rock 'N' Roll Gypsies 1989'. The first DVD is a complete show from the Wacken Festival 2001 in Germany. This was at a point when Saxon where re-emerging from the wilderness years of the late 1980s.

Professionally filmed and presented in Dolby Digital 5.1 sound, this is a great representation of a Saxon live show in all its sweaty glory. Kicking off with the classic 'Motorcycle Man', this clearly is a very different band. Nibbs Carter plays his bass guitar like a cross between Steve Harris and Angus Young, whilst Doug Scarrett and long term member Paul Quinn play back-to-back guitar licks.

The epic 'The Eagle Has Landed' looks all the more impressive with the giant metallic eagle at the back of the stage, something I remember fondly from the tour of the same name. This show was prior to Nigel Glockler returning to the drum stool and instead features Fritz Randow on drums – a solid drummer but lacking the flair of Glockler in my personal opinion.

The second DVD has various videos such as 'Suzie Hold On' and 'Power And The Glory' (with the band in space-age Ghostbusters outfits!). 'Nightmare', albeit a great track, has a comedic low budget feel (Biff Byford asleep on a glass table with bedroom walls made of cardboard!).

The only videos with any real production values or entertainment are 'Rockin' Again' and 'Back On The Streets'. The latter has the band in cowboy outfits larking around in a western town, though the less said about Quinn's wig the better! The TV appearances and interviews are from a variety of shows like Big Breakfast with Keith Chegwin alongside an early appearance of Richard Madeley on Yorkshire TV. Being a 1970's child, I especially enjoyed some of the early Top Of The Pops and Old Grey Whistle Test performances.

The bonus disc features original guitarist Graham Oliver, as well as (at the time) new bass player Carter. For me, this was a low point in Saxon's career, despite many classics being churned out around this time. 'Rock The Nations' and 'Northern Lady' I feel were Saxon's "treading water" period.

As a snap shot of a point in the bands history, the DVD is a great chronicle of a classic British Rock band but the bonus CD, albeit interesting, is far from an essential purchase.

Ray Paul

STATUS QUO – 'AQUOSTIC! LIVE AT THE ROUNDHOUSE' *(earMusic)* ROCK

Despite the misgivings about Status Quo going acoustic, the consensus seems to be it was a direction that worked, judging by the fact the 'Aquostic' album has been their best selling record since 'Don't Stop' all the way back in the 1996. This DVD/CD set features the band showcasing the re-worked material live on stage, as televised by the BBC.

They're often bashed for only knowing three chords and all that nonsense, which Quo take with their usual good humour, but it's only when you watch them recreate these songs acoustically that you realize there is a reason why they have been around for four decades. They write really good, catchy songs that you can't help but tap your feet to and they have the musicianship to put them in what should be a completely alien format, and it results in something quite brilliant.

This performance sees the band perform everything from the 'Aquostic' album, bringing with them all the added ingredients such as the female backing singers, strings, percussion… the works. What adds to it is the audience clapping and singing along, completely embracing this new sound.

As I reviewed 'Aquostic' previously, I don't need to say too much about the song arrangements themselves, but it's worth reminding everyone just how well tracks like 'Paper Plane', 'Whatever You Want' and 'Mystery Song' work in this unplugged style. Watching this, with the great lighting and enthusiastic crowd, only adds to what is already a great experience.

Available on DVD with an audio disc version, this is the perfect partner to the 'Aquostic' album. Thoroughly enjoyable!

James Gaden

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BOOKMARK

Rob McKenzie provides an overview of essential reading for music lovers everywhere

'108 ROCK STAR GUITARS' LISA S. JOHNSON *(Hal Leonard)*

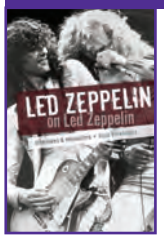
What's not to like? A good looking colourful book full of photos of your favourite guitarist's tools of the trade. Lisa S. Johnson has created such a book but has added the master touch of making the photos interesting from an unconventional and artistic point of view. So the photo of, for example, Ted Nugent's famous Gibson Byrdland guitar is a close-up of its edge showing his initials etched into it. Furthermore, the back of the Springsteen's famous Telecaster is shown instead of the front, with the years of use shown by the worn out varnish making it a great photo. That's the beauty; there are plenty of photos of guitars in all their glory but never from the same angle or with the same amount of light.

Why one hundred and eight guitars instead of one hundred? Well, the book explains in the introduction that one hundred and eight is a mystical number from an astrological point of view (e.g. the sun's diameter is one hundred and eight times that of the earth, the digits of one hundred and eight adds up to nine which timed by the number of star signs brings you back to one hundred and eight and so on). This provides the worthy excuse for a spiritual cover design. In fact the book treats guitars like divine items and, of note, has a foreword by the late Les Paul. The book took fifteen years to make and Paul for one was very impressed.

With that commendation, my positive review is all but superfluous. I will add that nearly all the guitarists you can think of are included (Ritchie Blackmore is not there but I was glad to see Michael Schenker having three pages dedicated to his flying Vs). As for my favourite guitar in the book, it has to be Dave Mustaine's Dean guitar with the 'Rust In Peace' artwork.

If you like guitars then this book is a must.

'LED ZEPPELIN ON LED ZEPPELIN: INTERVIEWS & ENCOUNTERS' HANK BORODOWITZ *(Omnibus Press)*



Over four hundred and fifty pages long, this tome covers magazine, radio and TV interviews that the Led Zeppelin members carried out. Well, to be honest, it starts before the first Zep album and the last main chapter covers a CBS interview with the three remaining members of the band in 2012 following their receipt of their Kennedy Center honor (U.S. spelling – when in Rome and all that).

With that massive time span and being in a band having defined the concept of Rock Gods, you would expect the band members to have lot to say. They certainly do from the start, but all members are careful about what they say and are very media savvy (even though that phrase didn't exist then). Clearly not wanting to burst their bubble, the band responses to interview questions are quite thoughtful without giving too much away, humorous and never blatantly slating any other bands, but cleverly putting a negative thought in your mind. For example, even when antagonised somewhat during an interview in Sydney in 1972 about comments by Ian Gillan, the band graciously back up each other and put their point of view across with no sign of sour grapes.

As far as telling the story of Zeppelin, the book's approach of being a chronological string of interview transcripts is as good a way as any. As the title says, it is 'LZ On LZ' with no hearsay and minimal author interpretation to get in the way. The complexities of the band carrying on solo after John Bonham's untimely death in 1980 is best told by the men themselves. The reason for the Zep not reforming or playing together for any more than the mere handful of times to date is pretty much covered in the individual interviews with Robert Plant and Jimmy Page.

If you are interested in the band's view of themselves and their music, get this piece of Rock history.

'STEVIE NICKS: VISIONS, DREAMS & RUMOURS' ZOË HOWE *(Omnibus Press)*

Although initially daunting as a four hundred page plus hardback book, this turned out to be an easy read because of Zoë Howe's entertaining writing style and most importantly the subject matter. The story of the making of 'Rumours' is pretty well known with a number of TV programmes dedicated to it, but less well known is the early career of Stevie Nicks in Fritz and then Buckingham Nicks and the book covers this period in depth as well.

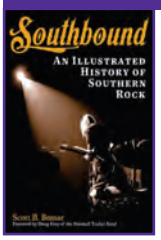
Moving on to her stellar career in Fleetwood Mac, examples of the angst between the members of the band are discussed to death. It would appear from the book that Lindsey Buckingham was not happy about her success as a key song-writer even though he had to "fix" her songs with his superior musicianship. This is very much a paraphrase of long sections of the book devoted to the love/hate love story of the ultimate Rock 'n' Roll couple but you get the picture.

Excess, hangers-on, an affair with married Mick Fleetwood, betrayal by friends etc. etc. are aspects of Nicks' far from normal life which, at the same time, resulted in the making of two great albums – 'Fleetwood Mac' and 'Rumours' – one distinctive disjointed album 'Tusk' and one not so special 'Mirage'.

Nicks' solo career – starting with 1980's 'Bella Donna' – is given a good airing and it is a pretty successful career, especially in the U.S. The end of the 'Tusk' tour resulted in Nicks recording with Jimmy Iovine in a far more efficient way than FM (at the time) could ever dream of. Support from Tom Petty and his band plus master pianist Roy Bittan resulted in Nicks having a musical backdrop with which she could sprinkle her fairy dust over her songs that she treated as her children. The low points of her solo career with her addiction to prescribed pills are very sad but of course the book closes with her triumphant upturn following the reformation of the Mac and a successful solo box-set release.

The book has a nice approach to the start of each chapter where it includes "factlets" about Nicks or FM that whets the appetite for what is later described in detail. As for sources; the book includes excerpts from previous biographies and autobiographies such as Mick Fleetwood's and various magazine interviews. Howe has put the pieces together well, stamped her own view and has included some interesting photos of Nicks and FM to boot; an essential read.

'SOUTHBOUND: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF SOUTHERN ROCK' SCOTT B. BOMAR *(Backbeat Books)*



It's nice to get a book which ticks off many things on a wish-list. First of all the book explains a Rock genre which I didn't fully understand. Next, it details the importance of The Allman Brothers which I did not previously fully appreciate and lastly it has sizeable biographies of my favourite Southern bands – Blackfoot and Molly Hatchet.

The complete history of Southern Rock is told in this meticulously detailed book by Scott Bomar. We learn that the predominately black Rock 'n' Roll stars mixed and played with the white musicians fascinated with the genre until Martin Luther King was murdered. From that point, it would appear the music worlds polarized and the white players continued playing but in their own furrow which led to Southern Rock.

The band that started the genre was TAB and many chapters are dedicated to Gregg and Duane. Exceptionally successful in the U.S., they created the template for other bands to follow. The other big name is, of course, Lynyrd Skynyrd and it's no surprise many chapters are dedicated to this band in its many guises, up to the plane crash and beyond. A lot of tragedy is involved in the Southern Rock story; alongside the Skynyrd plane crash, there was the motorbike death of Duane Allman.

The book ends on a positive note – the beacon of Southern Rock is held by a certain Kid Rock; although Detroit born, he is moving the spirit of the genre forward well into the 21st century.

With mini-biographies of the key bands of the genre plus piecing the whole story together, is certainly a one-stop shop for all things Southern.

'THE BEATLES SOLO' – MATT SNOW *(Race Point Publishing)*

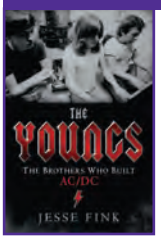
Matt Snow has created a very attractive box-set of four hardback books – one for each Beatle discussing their solo careers. The stories start during the split of The Beatles, as its demise was a long drawn out one and solo albums from Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr were recorded before the release of the 'Let It Be' album.

Of course, these solo career stories are not only about music; Starr and George Harrison had strong film connections. The former appeared in a number of notable films (generally playing his affable self against the backdrop of the film, be it prehistoric or Ancient Rome based) whilst, of course, the latter co-owned a production company called HandMade Films, which released amongst others 'Life Of Brian', 'Time Bandits' and 'Mona Lisa'. On the other hand, McCartney wrote, starred in and sang in 'Give My Regards To Broadway' – which the book is not very sympathetic about!

As for music, McCartney was probably the most consistent but don't forget Starr released over twelve solo albums. John Lennon had a five year hiatus before coming back with 'Double Fantasy' not long before being tragically murdered. Harrison had success periodically and was still recording right up to his death through illness in 2001.

The books are very attractive with lots of photos (mainly colour) and enough text to give a fairly good account of what TB were up to. To Beatles aficionados, there probably is not much in the way of new information contained within, but the strength of the books is that they contain comprehensive and entertaining biographies and together give a clear view of the overall post-Beatles legacy.

'THE YOUNGS' – JESSE FINK *(Black and White Publishing)*



Carefully titled 'The Youngs', this is very much about the Young clan and not just Angus and Malcolm. AC/DC aficionados will know that older brother George had a successful career with Australian band The Easybeats and then was behind the mixing desk of many of the AC/DC albums. Also mentioned in the book is Alex Young who was an accomplished musician but unfortunately passed away in 1997.

As per normal with AC/DC books, this is not sanctioned by the band but it does include first hand interviews from many band members and most of the people behind the scenes including Atlantic Records boss Jerry Greenberg. As a result the book focuses on the management and financial aspects of the band and links them to chapters relating to the author's favourite AC/DC songs. A further consequence of this approach is due to Fink's most recent favourite song being 'Thunderstruck', the book suddenly ends in 1990 followed by a very brief account of the subsequent twenty-four years.

It is an interesting read and shows the Youngs as a tight knit clan which has left a plethora of band members, engineers, managers and producers in its wake. There are a few slightly contentious subjects discussed, such as exactly who wrote the 'Back In Black' songs, and to be honest, the book doesn't try and gild the brothers as happy-go-lucky people. The author though constantly emphasises what superb musicians they are and how great their songs are. The music is all that matters at the end of the day; which is a phrase that would make a good subtitle.

Buy to find out how the Youngs both got to the top and also Rock and Rolled.

'SAIL AWAY: WHITESNAKE'S FANTASTIC VOYAGE' MARTIN POPOFF *(Soundcheck books)*

Written by Martin Popoff, prolific author on all things Rock, this book's focus is on Whitesnake up to the implosion following the 'Slip Of The Tongue' album. For completeness, Popoff also gives a whistle stop summary of the band's story to bring things up to date.

As in most Popoff books, he uses first hand stories; multiple interviews with David Coverdale himself are included in the text and lots of direct contributions from the U.K. version of the band (for want of a better term) – Bernie Marsden, Micky Moody, Neil Murray and Ian Paice. Correspondingly, the "international" band is well represented with quotes and views from John Sykes, Adrian Vandenberg and Steve Vai. The amount of first hand content is so immense that Popoff does not actually tell much of the story in his own words. Stitching together the accounts of the musicians, there are lots of views from Keith Olsen and most interestingly John Kalodner (who appears to have a lot to say about himself as well as Whitesnake).

DC himself, as expected, comes off pretty well; it is his band and he has the right to decide who he plays with – but a strong view from Kalodner is that John Sykes should have been a longer term writing and stage partner. Before the '1987' album, there were of course other casualties – essentially Marsden, Moody and Murray (even though he still played on the album) – and the book tells of the desire for the Whitesnake brand to go Hair Metal as demonstrated in the famous video trilogy of 'Still Of The Night', 'Here I Go Again' and 'Is This Love'.

Regarding revelations, there is one which I won't spoil for you but the reason for Steve Vai playing on 'Slip Of The Tongue' is more than alluded to by one interviewee. That album is discussed in full and even though it sold less than '1987', it still sold a lot and the accompanying tour did very well. It would appear from the book that the end of that version of Whitesnake was down to the Grunge period coming into play and overall exhaustion of DC and the band.

All in all, an interesting read and reaffirms Coverdale's place as a Rock icon.

PLAYLISTS

Ant Heeks rounds up the top picks for this issue - Scorpions and Whitesnake might consider them Villains, but FM are the Heroes this month...

1

FM
'Heroes And Villains'
(Frontiers)

2

Scorpions
'Return To Forever'
(Sony)

3

Whitesnake
'The Purple Album'
(Frontiers)

Bruce Mee

1. **Ten** – Isla De Muerta
2. **Nightwish** – Endless Forms Most Beautiful
3. **Kiske/Somerville** – City of Heroes
4. **Michael Schenker's Temple of Rock** – Spirit On A Mission
5. **Nelson** – Peace Out

Dave Scott

1. **Whitesnake** – The Purple Album
2. **Nightwish** – Endless Forms Most Beautiful
3. **Temperance** – Limitless
4. **Damnation Angels** – Valiant Fire
5. **Deep Purple** – Stormbringer

James Gaden

1. **Richie Kotzen** – Cannibals
2. **Whitesnake** – The Purple Album
3. **Thunder** – Wonder Days
4. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
5. **Mother's Finest** – Goody Two Shoes & The Filthy Beast

Steven Reid

1. **Steven Wilson** – Hand. Cannot. Erase.
2. **The King Lot** – The King Lot
3. **Blackberry Smoke** – Holding All The Roses
4. **Blueminded** – Blueminded
5. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever

Ant Heeks

1. **Halestorm** – Into The Wild Life
2. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
3. **Whitesnake** – The Purple Album
4. **We Are Harlot** – We Are Harlot
5. **Europe** – War Of Kings

Rob McKenzie

1. **Graham Bonnet** – Private i
2. **Marcel Singor** – Future Proof
3. **Todd Rundgren** – Global
4. **Pig Irön** – Sermons From The Church Of Blues Restitution
5. **Def Leppard** – Pyromania

Kieran Dargan

1. **Blackberry Smoke** – Holding All The Roses
2. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
3. **Babylon AD** – Live XXV
4. **Tonk** – Ruby Voodoo
5. **The Cadillac Three** – Tennessee Mojo

Mónica Castedo-López

1. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
2. **Whitesnake** – The Purple Album
3. **Michael Schenker's Temple of Rock** – Spirit On A Mission
4. **Richie Kotzen** – Cannibals
5. **Dan Reed** – Transmission

Ian Johnson

1. **Kamelot** – Haven
2. **Nelson** – Peace Out
3. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
4. **Radioactive** – F4UR
5. **Peterik/Scherer** – Risk Everything

Dave Bott

1. **Halestorm** – Into The Wild Life
2. **Papa Roach** – F.E.A.R.
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **Smash Into Pieces** – The Apocalypse DJ
5. **Like A Storm** – Awaken The Fire

Gary Marshall

1. **Hasse Fröberg & Musical Companion** – HFMC
2. **China Sky** – II

3. **Eric Gillette** – Afterthought
4. **Eyesberg** – Blue
5. **Steven Wilson** – Hand. Cannot. Erase.

Ray Paul

1. **Saxon** – Heavy Metal Thunder
2. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever
3. **Blackberry Smoke** – Holding All The Roses
4. **UFO** – A Conspiracy Of Stars
5. **Thunder** – Wonder Days

Mike Newdeck

1. **Like A Storm** – Awaken The Fire
2. **Nations UK** – Nations
3. **InDevotion** – Pretty Little Liar
4. **Arson City** – The Horror Show
5. **Divided Seasons** – When the Bough Breaks

Carl Buxton

1. **Von Hertzen Brothers** – New Day Rising
2. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever
3. **Kiske-Somerville** – City Of Heroes
4. **Peterik/Scherer** – Risk Everything
5. **Dark Sarah** – Behind The Black Veil

Julia Braun

1. **Frank Rohles** – Time Moves In Mysterious Ways
2. **Toto** – XIV

3. **Kiske / Somerville** – City Of Heroes
4. **Richie Sambora** – Aftermath Of The Lowdown
5. **Bon Jovi** – Keep The Faith

Alexandra Mrozowska

1. **Frederic Slama's AOR** – Return To L.A.
2. **Reach** – Reach Out To Rock
3. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
4. **Ammunition** – Shanghaied
5. **Lancer** – Second Storm

Helen Bradley Owers

1. **Richie Kotzen** – Cannibals
2. **Knock Out Kaine** – The Rise Of The Electric Jester
3. **Beth Hart** – Better Than Home
4. **Trucker Diablo** – Rise Above The Noise
5. **Bonafide** – Denim Devils

Dave Cockett

1. **Sorcerer** – In The Shadow Of The Inverted Cross
2. **Anthropia** – Non-Euclidean Spaces
3. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever
4. **Michael Schenker's Temple of Rock** – Spirit On A Mission
5. **Nightwish** – Endless Forms Most Beautiful

Az Chaudhry

1. **Steve Hackett** – Wolflight
2. **Michael Schenker's Temple of Rock** – Spirit On A Mission
3. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
4. **Toto** – XIV
5. **Nubian Rose** – Mental Revolution

Brent Rusche

1. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
2. **Bumblefoot** – Little Brother Is Watching
3. **Talon** – Fourplay
4. **Black Star Riders** – The Killer Instinct
5. **Control The Storm** – Beast Inside

Duncan Jamieson

1. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
2. **Thunder** – Wonder Days
3. **Kyle Gass Band** – Kyle Gass Band
4. **Europe** – War Of Kings
5. **Blackberry Smoke** – Holding All The Roses

Dave Crompton

1. **The Darker My Horizon** – Acquiesce
2. **H.e.a.t** – Live In London
3. **Crepuscule** – Virr
4. **Eden's Curse** – Live With The Curse
5. **Fish On Friday** – Godspeed

Mark Donnelly

1. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints
2. **Toto** – XIV
3. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize
4. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever
5. **Jace Pawlack** – Perception

Michael Anthony

1. **Von Hertzen Brothers** – New Day Rising
2. **Steven Wilson** – Hand. Cannot. Erase.
3. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever
4. **Neal Morse Band** – The Grand Experiment
5. **Jorn Lande and Trond Holter** – Dracula: Swing of Death

Steve Swift

1. **The Tangent** – A Spark In The Aether
2. **The Answer** – Raise A Little Hell
3. **Bad Touch** – Half Way Home
4. **Knock Out Kaine** – Rise Of The Electric Jester
5. **Black Whiskey** – Heavy Train

Mick Burgess

1. **Black Star Riders** – Killer Instinct
2. **Europe** – War Of Kings
3. **Gentle Storm** – The Diary
4. **Crimson Wind** – Last Poetry Line
5. **Eclipse** – Armageddonize

Bruce E.J. Atkinson

1. **The Answer** – Raise A Little Hell
2. **Ammunition** – Shanghaied
3. **Mainstreet** – Second Chance
4. **Thunder** – Wonder Days
5. **Robben Ford** – Into The Sun

Woody

1. **Issa** – Crossfire
2. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
3. **Corvus** – Chasing Miracles
4. **Windsor Drive** – Windsor Drive
5. **Serpentine** – Circle Of Knives

Mike Ainscoe

1. **Neal Morse Band** – The Grand Experiment
2. **Anathema** – Universal (Live & DVD)
3. **The Answer** – Raise A Little Hell
4. **Blind Guardian** – Beyond The Red Mirror
5. **Revolution Saints** – Revolution Saints

Alan Holloway

1. **Nightwish** – Endless Forms Most Beautiful
2. **FM** – Heroes And Villains
3. **The Crunch** – Brand New Brand
4. **Tony Mills** – Over My Dead Body
5. **Kiske/Somerville** – City Of Heroes

Ian Parry

1. **Magnum** – Escape From the Shadow Garden Tour Live 2014
2. **Europe** – War Of Kings
3. **The Answer** – Raise A Little Hell
4. **Scorpions** – Return To Forever
5. **Gun** – Frantic

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FIRIN' ON ALL SIX!

JEFFERSON STARSHIP
Gateshead: The Sage
04 February 2015

For most, reaching the milestone of fifty years in a job would earn them a gold clock and a firm handshake from their boss as they shuffled off into retirement. Not so for Paul Kantner, the guitarist/vocalist who founded Psychedelic Rockers Jefferson Airplane a mere half a century or so ago, a man who shows no signs of acquiring a shiny time piece just yet.

JA rose to prominence during the Flower Power era with inspired performances at legendary festivals such as Woodstock and Altamont while the songs 'White Rabbit' and 'Somebody To Love' defined an era as their biting anti Vietnam War stance set them against the American establishment.

With vocalist David Freiberg from Quicksilver Messenger Service jumping aboard in 1972 Jefferson Airplane morphed into the more streamlined Jefferson Starship and continued on and off, with the odd JA reunion for good measure, up to the present day.

Mixing a set containing the best moments of the JA catalogue with that of JS while avoiding anything by glossy "Radio Rockers" Starship (the splinter group formed by ex-JS members who scored hits with 'We Built This City' and 'Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now'), they gave the crowd exactly what they wanted.

The dreamy 'Miracles' with its silky smooth harmonies and the elegant melody of 'Count On Me' were the perfect songs for a breezy summer's day, notwithstanding the Arctic blast swirling outside on a freezing Gateshead evening. The dramatic 'Wooden Ships' featured some stunning, cinematic harmonies with the warm, melodious vocals of Freiberg and gravel-edged tones of Kantner that intertwined with the imposing, powerful vocals of Cathy Richardson to striking effect.

'Eat Starch Mom' and it's Funky riff picked up the pace as 'Jane' brought some pristine American AOR to the show; it matched the very best of Journey, Foreigner and Toto complete with one of the most thrilling lead guitar breaks ever laid down and that alone was worth every penny of the admission fee.

Missing such an iconic figure as Grace Slick, who retired from music a few years ago, would have had a detrimental impact on most bands but Kantner is no fool and in picking Richardson he has ensured Slick's legacy was treated with respect. Richardson was inspired throughout and none more so than on '... Love' and '...Rabbit'.

As the last night of the whole U.K. tour came to an end, support act Auburn joined in for the revolutionary clarion call of 'Volunteers' which included JS's tour manager on drums which brought everything to a rousing finish.

Fifty years in the business is a long time and it's doubtful whether any of today's acts will have such staying power. Jefferson Starship drew on that experience and delivered an outstanding performance to match their illustrious legacy.

Mick Burgess

SAXON
London: Shepherds Bush Empire
07 February 2015

With the 2014 U.K. dates rescheduled due to drummer Nigel Glockler falling ill last year, Sven

Dirkshneider (son of Udo and former Accept vocalist) stepped in and took on all remaining drum duties for the rest of the run. The show this evening was sold out and this was the last night of their thirty-eight date tour.

The set-list was predominantly based around the three albums; 'Wheels Of Steel', 'Strong Arm Of The Law' and 'Denim And Leather'. The inclusion of more recent songs, 'I've Got To Rock' and 'Sacrifice' slotted in quite comfortably amongst the hits.

Despite the band looking a little worn out from the long tour, they managed to pump out the classics in true head-banging fashion. The likes of 'Motorcycle Man' and 'Hell And Back Again' crashed out the speakers as guitarists Paul Quinn and Doug Scarratt exchanged lead breaks at the front of the stage; bass player Nibbs Carter played with more energy than guys half his age.

Front-man and singer Biff Byford (who in my opinion does not get anywhere near the critical acclaim he should) still possesses an incredible set of pipes, and his vocals on 'Heavy Metal Thunder' were spectacular. Producer and guitarist Andy Sneep joined the band for a truly furious '20,000 Feet', before Saxon dropped in the rarely performed 'Suzie Hold On'.

It has to be said the audience were a crazy bunch, and we were treated to some impressive crowd surfing, much to the amusement of Byford. Glockler did make an appearance and received a rapturous roar when he sat in for one song on the marvellous '747 Strangers In The Night'. 'Wheels Of Steel', 'Strong Arm Of The Law' and 'Denim And Leather' (with a guest vocal from German "Metal Queen" Doro Pesch) completed the encore.

Saxon are a band that have steered their ship through thirty-five years of musical trends and were still clearly the Captains Of British Heavy Metal.

Ray Paul

MONSTER MAGNET, BOMBUS
Nottingham: Rock City
13 February 2015

Having arrived at Rock City, it felt unusual to find the room so empty (possibly less than thirty people), having become so used to the packed crowds for Firefest. Fortunately more people started to wander in just as Swedish quartet Bombus took to the stage.

The band from Gothenburg played old-school, no frills, heads down, foot on the monitor Heavy Metal and the crunching riffs and snarling vocals came across as something of a Motörhead/Megadeth hybrid. What lead singer/guitarist Feffe lacked in range he made up for with power and alongside second guitarist Matte managed to generate an incendiary wall of noise. I missed many of the song titles but set closer 'Into The Fire' was a good indication of what Bombus were about and though they are totally unoriginal, they are certainly not the worst support I've seen in recent years and the cobwebs were well and truly blown away.

By the time the headliners made an appearance, the crowd had swelled considerably and even though it was nowhere near a sell-out, the atmosphere felt a lot better. They opened with Robert Calvert's 'The Right Stuff' which was a great start and immediately hands went up in the air and heads bobbed away. 'Dopes To Infinity' was also greeted enthusiastically, the three guitars made quite an impact alongside a powerful rhythm section and a number of programmed elements. 'Look To Your Orb For The Warning' followed and it was clear that Monster Magnet were not content to rest on old material laurels. I was unfamiliar with many of the songs and would personally have preferred more from the 'Powertrip', 'God Says No', 'Monolithic Baby' and '4-Way Diablo' albums.

A lengthy twelve minute version of 'Last Patrol' was more like an extended jam and main-man Dave Wyndorf's role became secondary to guitarists Phil Caivano and Garrett Sweeny. The MM style is akin to early Black Sabbath with a touch of Hawkwind and Clutch thrown in. Their Psychedelic Stoner Rock wouldn't normally be my usual cup of tea but I have liked much of what I have heard in the past.

It seems the most recent albums have more of a Psychedelic air about them, almost like a trip back to the 1960s for Wyndorf and co and that was the overall vibe of the night. If I am honest, by the end of the evening, I was losing a bit of interest as too many songs were extended to the ten minute length and though the set lasted eighty minutes we only got twelve.

I think I may have been in a minority as Monster Magnet quite obviously have a strong enough fan base to generate a decent sized crowd even on a cold February night.

Dave Bott

BLACK LABEL SOCIETY
Nottingham: Rock City
18 February 2015

It had been a long time since I saw Zakk Wylde at Rock City. It has been even longer since he played here the first time, down in the basement bar and prior to having a beard, where his heads down, no nonsense mindless Boogie resulted in his hair almost whipping my partner to death.

It was hot, sweaty and very crowded that night and it would have been the same in the main hall tonight were it not for the ventilation system. A cross section of musical fandom was present; Rockers, Punks, Goths, young, old and even a few Hell's Angels. The anticipation was heightened when the Black Label Society backdrop, too large for Rock City as it was usually used at festivals etc, was hung in front of the stage. A red searchlight shone on the curtain while the air raid siren warned everyone to duck and cover, before the curtain dropped to reveal Wylde, stood on a platform, guitar being brandished like an offensive weapon.

They started right from the beginning, in the literal sense, with 'The Beginning… At Last' and then continued with 'Funeral Bell', 'Bleed For Me', 'Heart Of Darkness', 'Suicide Messiah' and 'Dying Time'. There were no surprises and to be fair nobody wanted any; "loud, fast and heavy man" was what was required and indeed delivered. 'Damn The Flood' came next, and Wylde decided to do a ten minute solo where he tormented the guitar into making all kinds of squeals and screams from hell, before breaking into 'Godspeed Hellbound'. I had to smile as, in the 1970s, Richie Blackmore would have been slagged off as self-indulgent for doing such a thing. As adept as Wylde is at the fast and heavy, I always like the contrasting quieter songs, and our ears got a little recovery time with 'Angel Of Mercy' followed by 'In This River' performed solo on the keyboard before 'Blessed Hellride', 'Concrete Jungle' and 'Stillborn' brought the evening to a close.

There was no encore, which was a little disappointing, but everyone got everything they

wanted from this evening. Plus I always like the idea of seeing someone used to playing larger venues and festivals at a more intimate venue, so I was pleased enough.

Andy Brailsford

GUS G, ARTHEMIS, SKARLETT RIOT
Manchester: Academy 3
21 February 2015

It's been a while since I was last in this venue and though it is only small I was very surprised to see that it was so empty tonight. There were around seventy-five people in attendance and that number did not change much as the evening progressed.

This is the third time I've seen Skarlett Riot in a little over a year and I have to say that they have improved considerably each time. 2013's debut 'Tear Me Down' was a great slice of Halestorm-like Melodic Rock and received critical acclaim from the music press. The new five track EP ('We Are The Brave') saw the band continue to impress so I was keen to see how the new material would come across live. What was apparent from the moment SK took to the stage was that constant touring has seen an increase in confidence and everyone seemed to be having a blast, despite the small crowd. With only thirty minutes to make an impression, there was no time to waste and though the set was brief, it left everyone in no doubt that bigger things are on the horizon. Newer songs such as 'Wake Up', 'Are You Alive' and 'Rising' sat nicely next to the established favourites such as 'Villain' and 'Tear Me Down' and lead-singer Chloe Drinkwater was impressive throughout to say the least. This was a great way to start the evening and I'll be watching for more tour dates in 2015 for sure.

With the cobwebs well and truly blown away it was something of a disappointment when Italian Power Metallers Arthemis failed to capitalise on the great vibe that had been created. I may have been in a minority, as the band seemed to have a number of fans in the room, but the songs just came across as a wall of noise. There was no doubting that front-man Fabio Dessi has a powerful set of pipes and that lead guitarist (and founder member) Andrea Martongelli threw all the right shapes and pulled all the right faces, but the arrangements lacked cohesion and identity. I decided to retire to the bar for some refreshments after three songs in the hope that I could save my hearing for the main attraction.

Gus G has seen his profile rise considerably since becoming the Prince Of Darkness's six-string foil so it was great to finally see him as the main man. The 'I Am The Fire' album was a perfect showcase for both his writing and playing skills outside the Metal environment with which he is more normally associated; my admiration for his ability has existed through his time in Dream Evil and Firewind. With so much material to choose from it was great to hear the likes of 'My Will Be Done', 'Blame It On Me' and 'Eyes Wide Open' (from '…Fire') as well as DE favourites 'Break The Chains' and 'Children Of The Night' and Firewind classics 'World On Fire' and 'The Fire And The Fury'. As you would expect from a lead guitarist, the obligatory self-indulgent moments arrived in the form of 'Vengeance' and 'Terrified' and it was amusing to hear Gus confess that he could have soloed all day long after he missed his cue to conclude one of the instrumental passages.

A number of singers feature on the 2014 solo album but tonight all the vocals were handled by Henning Basse and he managed to cover all the styles perfectly. Drummer Joe Nunez took time out from his Firewind day job and it is hard to believe from the noise he was generating that his kit is so small. SR's Chloe Drinkwater appeared once more for a mesmerising version of 'Long Way Down' which reinforced her talents and displayed great range and emotion. The set concluded with a rousing cover of 'Crazy Train' and suddenly Gus has an extra seventy-five backing singers and when it came time to leave the stage he appeared truly humbled from the response. The eighty minute set flew by and was a fantastic way to spend a Saturday night.

Dave Bott

PALLAS, JUMP
Wath Upon Dearne: Montgomery Hall
21 February 2015

The last time I encountered Pallas in a live capacity I'll admit that I was somewhat underwhelmed. Had this weekend not been arranged as a "Jumblies Reunion" (Firefest regulars will know "The Jumblies") I certainly wouldn't have been moved to make the effort of travelling the length of the country to attend this gig which doubled as the Classic Rock Societies Annual Awards event (for the record IQ were major recipients); that would have been a big mistake and a missed opportunity because tonight Pallas were terrific and delivered a superb set.

Whilst elements of Paul Mackies' stage persona are, for me, a little difficult to appreciate, it has to be said that he has now made the front-man role in Pallas his own. Despite some throat issues that required regular lubrication, his performance matched the quality of the music; particularly on an awesome rendition of 'In Cold Blood' which featured just vocals and Ronnie Brown's keyboards and was the first of three encore tracks. It was one of those spine-tingling moments that music can produce and one which really moved you.

A somewhat shambolic entry onto the stage was soon forgotten as the band plunged into a powerful and melodic 'Falling Down', which set the tone for evening. In what could be viewed as a brave move, but turned out to be an inspired one, they then played five tracks from their terrific latest album ('Wearewhoweare'). Every one of these was meritorious but 'Harvest Moon' was darkly spectacular while 'Wake Up Call' mixed light verses with heavier and extremely catchy choruses. 'New Life' was equally memorable where Mackie excelled, particularly on the songs opening passage.

After the five new songs it was time to delve into the back catalogue and whilst individuals may argue for other tracks, I don't think the selection could have been much better; 'Rat Racing', 'Ghost Dancers', 'Midas Touch' and 'Cut And Run' each hit the spot very nicely indeed. Graeme Murray was very active in this section as his signature Rickenbacker bass and gigantic bass pedal sounds drove the songs along in monumental fashion.

The second encore was another huge number, 'The Cross & The Crucible', before they concluded with perennial favourite 'Arrive Alive', which allegedly was unrehearsed, not that you'd have known.

The evening had opened with a short but sweet acoustic set from Jump who entertained both musically and through John Dexter Jones' amusing anecdotes. I was unfamiliar with them before tonight but now I know why people compare Jones to Derek Dick, aka Fish.

Gary Marshall

IN THIS MOMENT
Manchester: Academy 2
02 March 2015

The In This Moment star is certainly on the rise. A new deal with Atlantic Records has helped push sales of the latest album, 'Black Widow', past those of all previous releases and also means that a proper tour of the U.K. was possible for the first time. I spoke to guitarist and founder member Chris Howorth recently and he was unsure about the band's popularity outside of America but based on tonight, he was left with no doubts.

The show was, apparently, not a sell-out but that was hard to believe from the noise that the crowd generated when ITM appeared on stage after a brief spoken intro and an instrumental passage that introduced us to the two female dancers augmenting the theatrical proceedings. As soon as lead singer Maria Brink made her entrance and the band kicked into 'Sick Like Me', it was clear that this would be more than just a normal gig.

I was lucky enough to witness the entire show from the photo pit, surely the ideal vantage point, and was floored by how much detail was given to each and every song. I'm sure that those at the back of the room that were hindered by the taller members of the crowd will have missed some of the performance, even though the songs are the most important factor from a musical standpoint.

Tonight the focus was on '…Widow' and the 2012 release 'Blood'. There was a brief break between

each song which allowed Brink some slight costume changes and enabled the stage hands to add some new props. 'Black Widow', 'Adrenalize' and 'Sex Metal Barbie' had great energy and Brink's Lady Gaga meets Marilyn Manson stage persona was both menacing and highly sexual. One of my favourite ITM songs was the emotionally charged 'Into The Light' but that was the only one tonight that failed to move me. I thought Brink tried too hard and the vocals that should have been poignant lacked quality and were forced.

Howorth and the other guys, Randy Weitzel (guitar), Travis Johnson (bass) and Tom Hane (drums), got their moment in the spotlight during a bone-crunching instrumental medley that included Metallica, Slayer and Pantera material. 'Whore' saw great crowd involvement and when the night finished with an incendiary version of 'Blood' many people did not want to leave the room.

There were only nine proper songs during a seventy minute set but as far as I was aware, not one person around me complained. Go and see In This Moment; it is not just a "Rock Show" but an unforgettable Metal music experience.

Dave Bott

THE NEAL MORSE BAND, BEARDFISH
London: Islington Assembly Hall
07 March 2015

This was a remarkable gig and not just due to the quality of the music. Those of us irritated by the delay in the venue doors opening later found out why when a fan shouted out "how's Mike (Portnoy)?" It then emerged that so ill was he that he'd been to A&E, only to be kept waiting so long he'd left without being seen so as not to miss the show and disappoint us; thank goodness he did because both he and the band were absolutely immense.

A decent intro preceded the band's entrance onto stage before they launched into 'Following The Call', the superb opening epic from their recent 'The Grand Experiment' album. The energy that poured from the stage was palpable as they tore into the song with gusto; Eric Gillette's guitar solo was sensational.

They then hit us with the heavy 'Leviathan' and followed this with the aforementioned album's title track which kept the energy high; although it has to be said that Neal Morse's voice was a little stretched on these. It was then time for a wonderful surprise with the appearance of the Spock's Beard classic 'Harm's Way' with a short excerpt of 'Go The Way You Go' being included. This was a special moment and a song the band delivered wonderfully.

Bill Hubauer then played a keyboard solo which served as the intro to 'The Creation' during which Portnoy excelled, despite his ailment. Portnoy announced it was at this juncture of the show that Morse took centre stage with his acoustic guitar and played something different each night. Tonight we were the lucky recipients of Transatlantic's 'Shine'. It was beautiful and Morse was clearly moved by the crowd's participation.

When you thought that it couldn't get any better it did, Morse, Portnoy, Hubauer and Gillette sat on stools and played the acoustic brilliance that is 'Waterfall'. Towards the end bassist Randy George appeared behind the keyboards and in the closing moments Hubauer took up the clarinet... superb!

Gillette then entertained with a short solo that started mellow, got flashy and then led into what proved to be the closing song, the twenty plus minutes that was the epic 'Alive Again'. As if the song wasn't good enough on its own, we witnessed the band members trading instruments where they all demonstrated incredible prowess.

Openers, Beardfish have been an enigma to me but

tonight, aside from one track, they produced a set that resonated because it was based around their more melodic and less challenging material, notably those from the '+4626 Comfortzone' album. The exception was the shouty and aggressive 'Green Waves', although the instrumental section was terrific.

Gary Marshall

HALESTORM
Wolverhampton: Civic Hall
09 March 2015

With a schedule that allowed me only enough time to see Halestorm, I must apologise to the two support bands who I unfortunately but unavoidably missed. Hopefully I'll have the opportunity of seeing you next time. After the release of the 'Into The Wild Life', the ultimately disappointing follow-up to 2012's seismic 'The Strange Case Of…', I was interested to see if Halestorm's new songs would be given a well needed kick up the backside in the live arena.

The Civic Hall has always had excellent acoustics and, as usual, the sound was top-drawer; the rather lean sounding album, for the moment, at least forgotten. Lzzy Hale's powerful vocals are what drive this band and in front of an enthusiastic crowd, the new songs lifted from '…Life' seemed far more convincing and, perhaps, how the band intended them to sound. Out of the five played ('Amen', 'Apocalyptic', 'I Am The Fire', 'I Like It Heavy' and 'Mayhem') from the latest offering, opener 'Apocalyptic' and 'Amen' translated well; Lzzy Hale's vocals received the necessary backing from her brother Arejay Hale on drums and Joe Hottinger's tight rhythm guitar. However it was really the older material that served the band the best tonight. We got rousing renditions of 'Love Bites', 'I Miss The Misery', 'Freak Like Me' and 'Daughters Of Darkness' from 'The Strange…' together with the almost obligatory 'Familiar Taste Of Poison' from the debut (where Lzzy Hale showed what a talent she really is) and the crunching 'It's Not You'. Arejay Hale had time for his drum solo which he completed with giant drum sticks and whilst it was a little tedious, as most drum solos are, it allowed the band to take a well-deserved breather. As an encore (you guessed it) Halestorm played the sing-along combo of 'Rock Show' and 'Here's To Us' and this pair rounded off a thoroughly enjoyable and polished performance together with a lightshow that was one of the best that I have witnessed.

Halestorm's new album may well be disappointing, as far as I am concerned, but with luck we'll see a return to form on the next release with a better set of songs and (hopefully) a return to using Howard Benson as producer. Until then, I'll keep enjoying the band live as that's clearly where they are at their strongest.

Mike Newdeck

WHITE WIDDOW, TEENAGE CASKET COMPANY, DEGREED
Sutton-In-Ashfield: The Diamond
10 March 2015

The great thing about festivals like HRH AOR is that some of the bands that come over to take part in it quite often do their own shows beforehand, so I found myself attending two gigs on two consecutive nights by two of the best Melodic Rock bands around at the moment, with some interesting supports that I was mostly unfamiliar with.

It's the first time I have visited The Diamond, in all honesty it's just a pub, albeit one with a good atmosphere and an impressively clear sound system for a venue of its size, one that puts some bigger and more established venues to shame. The only downside to tonight's show was the disappointingly poor turnout, but all three bands gave it their all as if they were playing Wembley Stadium.

First up was Swedes Degreed who delivered an immense sound for a quartet, what I really liked about this band was that their songs have huge hooks but with intricate arrangements that don't stick to the verse, chorus, verse, chorus, solo, chorus formula. Vocalist/bassist Robin Ericsson's voice was strong and absolutely pitch perfect, with the backing vocals of guitarist Daniel Johansson the perfect foil, while the latter also proved his worth with some stunning guitar work. A good mix of songs from both their albums were aired, with 'Black Cat', 'Follow Her Home' and the semi-balladic title-track from their latest 'We Don't Belong' seemingly the most recognizable by the crowd. A new tune, 'Kill Your Darlings', was slipped in while they also threw in a cover of Steve Perry's 'Captured By The Moment' which was a sure-fire way to get the crowd on their side, not as if they needed encouragement. Judging by the merchandise that was sold from the front of the stage after the show, Degreed certainly won some new admirers on this tour.

Teenage Casket Company were added to this tour at the eleventh hour after Night By Night had to pull out of a couple of the shows, most probably drafted in because vocalist/guitarist Rob Wylde plays bass in Tigertailz alongside White Widdow front-man Jules Millis. TCC's approach is of the Glam/Sleaze variety which isn't really my bag, but there was a hefty dose of melody and some enormously catchy choruses in the likes of 'Don't Look At Me Like That', 'You Only Love Me When You Hate Me', 'Best Friend Is My Radio' and the mid-tempo 'Without You' that couldn't fail to win you over. Their cover of The Beastie Boys' 'Fight For Your Right (To Party)' went down an absolute treat, with Wylde, guitarist Dave Kerr and bassist Rob Lane all trading the vocal lines in the spirit of the original version. A job well done at short notice, and a band I will certainly be looking out for in the future.

I've been a fervent admirer of WW since I was sent their debut album to review and have managed to catch them on every visit to the U.K. As Millis said as he attempted to coax the audience forward to surround the stage, "we've come all the way from Australia to see you; the least you can do is step forward a few feet!" Newest album 'Crossfire' was one of the highlights of 2014, and it was the hard-hitting title-track that kicked the set off in fine fashion. Guitarist Enzo Almanzi, who sported a backwards baseball cap and a natty luminous green Ibanez guitar, fired off the scything riff before he peeled off the first of many amazing solos – definitely a much underrated talent.

The set incorporated a fair selection from all three albums and the second number headed back to the 'Serenade' album and then into more traditional Melodic Rock territory for 'Strangers In The Night'. WW returned to 'Crossfire' for the up-tempo 'Angel' which was followed by the slowest number featured this evening, the classy 'Do You Remember'. Millis clearly struggled with a cold and was drinking endless amounts of water to enable him to get through the set, but he truly gave his all, assisted with excellent harmony vocals coming from his keyboardist brother Xavier and new bassist Ben Webster.

What I really liked was how the band presented some of their less obvious numbers like 'Spirit Of Fire', 'Show Your Cards' and 'Change Of Passion' instead of the typical hit-sounding material. However it was the Van Halen-sounding 'Reckless Nights' and the sing-along anthem 'Broken Hearts Won't Last Forever' that closed the set in style – or so they thought, as The Diamond owner encouraged them to do one more song, and as they haven't anything else planned, they plumped for a great cover of Aviator's 'Frontline' as a final hurrah.

Ant Heeks

ECLIPSE, TAINTED NATION, REACH
Grimsby: Yardbirds
11th March 2015

A Swedish invasion of sorts ascended upon Grimsby tonight for another Hard Rock Hell warm-up, an evening further enhanced by Europe's 'Live At Sweden Rock' DVD being played on the big screen before show time.

Young newcomers Reach kicked things off; their debut album 'Reach Out To Rock' sees them hoping to follow in the footsteps of the mighty H.e.a.t. Unfortunately however, that Europe DVD had to be aired once again for a short while because following the second song, they had to take a break to repair a broken bass drum. The momentum of the first two songs was somewhat lost and once they got going again, they seemed to struggle to make any impact; singer Alex Waghorn's repeated attempts to get the audience to clap along proved rather fruitless. I was impressed with the band, but found Waghorn a little annoying and I'm not a huge fan of his voice. They definitely have potential, but still have a lot to learn.

Tainted Nation on the other hand are made up of seasoned pros with an immense collective CV, and it showed. Pete Newdeck hasn't got the greatest voice in the world, something in all honesty he would probably agree with, but his larger than life personality and cheeky yet polite demeanour certainly make him an engaging front-man. It was also hard not to get absorbed in the sheer energy of their music. What was also equally clear was just how important rhythm guitarist Joel Peters and token Swede bassist (and former Poodle) Pontus Egberg are to the TN sound with their complimentary vocal work. Ian Nash proved he can shred with the best of them, while drummer Mark Cross was just immense. A couple of new songs were performed tonight, 'Karma' in particular demonstrated that debut album 'F.E.A.R.' wasn't just a one trick pony and complemented the more familiar 'Dare You' and 'Loser' perfectly. It was an excellent set that was very well received.

For me, Eclipse are the epitome of what Melodic Rock is all about and Erik Mårtensson is a song-writing genius. He is also an impressive front-man with relentless energy levels and tonight he bounced around the small stage as he sported a huge grin and waved his scarf-adorned microphone stand above the heads of the front row.

Naturally, new album 'Armageddonize' was heavily plundered for material, with the occasional nod back to 'Bleed And Scream' – indeed, the opening salvo of 'I Don't Wanna Say I'm Sorry' and 'Stand On Your Feet' were greeted like established old friends while 'Wake Me Up' introduced the first real sing-along of the evening. As the set progressed it simply became the quintessential guide to how to perform the perfect Melodic Rock anthem as huge chorus followed huge chorus as they tore through the likes of 'The Storm', the Celtic-tinged 'Battlegrounds', the punchy 'Love Bites', 'Blood Enemies' (preceded by an impressive Magnus Henriksson guitar solo) and the searing 'Ain't Dead Yet'. The only respite from the energetic assault came in the shape of the impeccably sung power ballad 'Live Like I'm Dying' and when Mårtensson strapped on an acoustic guitar for the stomping 'Breakdown'.

Unbelievably an hour has already passed when they closed the set with the melodious 'Bleed And Scream' itself and the fast-paced 'All Died Young'. It seemed like that was the finale of the evening but Eclipse finally returned after what felt like an interminably long time for the glorious 'S.O.S.' and the nights only selection from the 'Are You Ready To Rock' album, the Whitesnake-influenced 'Breaking My Heart Again'.

Earlier Mårtensson revealed that he had never heard of Grimsby until this tour, but it's somewhere he will never forget. After tonight's excellent show I don't think Grimsby will ever forget Eclipse.

Also a big shout-out must go to Fireworks' very own Sue Ashcroft for putting together two very impressive touring packages.

Ant Heeks

THUNDER
Birmingham: Barclaycard Arena
13 March 2015

It was Thunder's first ever Arena "headlining" tour and tonight was the second of the three shows. Their 2013 jaunt with Journey and Whitesnake proved they can take their brand of Cockney, charm-induced Blues/Rock from their usual theatres and convert it to an arena; whether they could sustain the party atmosphere for over an hour and fifty minute set was never really in doubt.

I missed Tax The Heat's opening set, and I won't waste any word space on Reef except to say they were absolute shite – this was a complete mismatch for Thunder, the likes of FM or The Answer would have

been a far greater proposition.

The headliner's set opened with a montage of photos recalling popular culture of the twentieth century displayed on the rear stage screen before Thunder's logo appeared and Luke Morley arrived on stage and cranked out the riff to 'Wonder Days' – as the first single from their latest album it was the perfect opener. They followed it with the classic 'River Of Pain' which really got the pulses racing and gave Danny Bowes his first opportunity to "dad dance" around the stage in the way only he can without it looking cringe-worthy. Obviously having a lot of faith in their new material, another three new songs from it were selected, 'Black Water', the gloriously melodic 'Resurrection Day' and the beautiful ballad 'Broken'.

'The Devil Made Me Do It' got back to more familiar surroundings, but it wasn't until 'Backstreet Symphony' heralded the first selection from that mighty debut that the arena well and truly erupted for the first time. As it was their first headlining shows for some time, Thunder also delved into their back catalogue for a couple of lesser-heard gems, namely the epic 'Empty City' and the Bluesy ballad 'I'll Be Waiting'. Another couple of newies, 'The Thing I Want' and 'When The Music Played' slotted into the set neatly and brought the latest album's choices to six (I wish they'd have done 'The Prophet' though!) and led up to the main set's big finish – 'Love Walked In' is my favourite Thunder song and it was as suitably immense as ever, then the fun Rocker 'I Love You More Than Rock And Roll' closed proceedings.

Encore time featured the moody 'Low Life In High Places' and 'Higher Ground', then frankly there was only really one song left to do; "what do you want us to do next?" questioned Bowes. "Dirty Love!" was the answer and a mass sing-along and standing ovation ensued.

It seems Thunder have seamlessly adapted to the big stage. Bowes' impeccable voice is as perfect as ever as it bellowed around the arena, Ben Matthews thankfully showed no lasting signs of his recent health issues as he slung his Les Paul around, even the normally reticent Chris Childs had the occasional boogie across the stage. Harry James seems somewhat subdued however, with none of the tomfoolery of old.

Thunder are back with a bang, hopefully they can continue in this vein for some time. As a British institution the only thing that is left is a knighthood. Arise, Sirs Bowes, Morley, Matthews, Childs and James!

Ant Heeks

HARDCORE SUPERSTAR, BONAFIDE, NITRODIVE
Manchester: Club Academy
14 March 2015

It was the turn of all things Swedish to take over the Club Academy in Manchester for a night that featured a three band line-up of Hard Rock in the most atmospheric of the Academy's venues. It wasn't exactly rammed but it almost felt like everyone there had a bit more fun which made up for it.

NitroDive – a three-piece from Gothenburg who were playing for the first time in Manchester – came to the stage first. Each song was thumped out with bursts of raw energy and some powerful, Punk-inspired riffs. Though only a small crowd had shown up for the opening act, NitroDive commanded the limited stage space where their power made up for the lack of movement. Musically very tight, their songs varied from thundering bass in 'Dead Or Alive' to a punchy rendition of 'Hey Ho, Let's Go!' On 'Dying To Live', the three performers showed how you don't always have to have guitar during verses and sometimes knowing when not to play is as good a talent as knowing when to. With a fantastically raw sound, positive energy and a powerful performance; this was a great way to kick off what was clearly a hotly anticipated gig.

Next up were Swedish Rock 'n' Rollers, Bonafide. The basement-style Club suited the Bluesy, underground tone to their music, though it was AC/DC that could be heard most prominently. With throaty vocals, long hair to flick and fat catchy riffs, what was there not to like? Lead vocalist and guitarist Pontus Snibb took a walk through the crowd for a solo which added to the light-hearted energy of the performance. What really struck me through the whole evening was not only the positivity and approachability of the bands, but also the fun they had on stage and the energy they put into their performances. If it was just another show to them, they sure didn't make it look like one. Bonafide's classic style of Rock 'n' Roll won't be for everyone but they played it faultlessly this evening.

Finally the main event arrived. Without needless airs and graces Hardcore Superstar came out, each member with a wide grin and they kicked off with 'We Don't Celebrate Sundays'. I think the fact they started with the well-known anthem took the crowd by surprise but the show surged forward full-throttle from there. New numbers 'The Cemetery' and 'Off With Their Heads' were received well; it was helped by the fact the band threw themselves into the songs whole-heartedly. HS are not a showy band; that is not to say they do not put on a show (boy, they do) but they keep it simple, concise and running at full-pace. Lead singer Jocke Berg bounced around the stage like a piece in a pinball machine as he belting out his characteristic Sleazy-styled vocals. Classics like 'Dreamin' In A Casket' and 'Wild Boys' seemed to roll from the band effortlessly; they never failed to keep engaged with the fans as they leered, grinned, high-fived and yelled at the audience to sing louder. The slower track 'Fly' (from the new album) disrupted the show's tempo a little, although it's always good to hear Berg sing A Cappella as guitarist Vic Zino really powered through the strong riff. Admittedly, there was nothing new to HS's stage show tonight. However, when a band is this musically tight and so engaged with the crowd, what more could you ask for?

For the encore, Berg gave another raw and emotive a cappella performance in the middle of 'Don't Mean Shit To Me'; the band have always fallen in and out of little tricks like this so effortlessly and then exploded out of them with so much power. An attitude-soaked performance of 'Moonshine' was followed by 'Above the Law' which finished a rowdy and, typical Hardcore Superstar, electric show.

Sophie Brownlee

PAPA ROACH
Manchester: Academy
15 March 2015

A second night in Manchester gave a sense of deja vu (having seen Halestorm at the Apollo the night before) but certainly not in a musical sense. A Papa Roach show has become an annual event and I have never failed to be impressed by the way they can manipulate an audience and raise the energy levels. The tour had been sold out for weeks and there was hardly room for a fart to squeeze through the crowd (yet some still tried) when four silhouettes appeared on stage.

'Face Everything And Rise' (taken from the recent 'F.E.A.R' album) was a great opener and it saw fists in the air right from the off. I have become accustomed to the Roach crowds from past shows so I was careful not to get too close to the front (I was originally due to start the show in the photo pit but was unable to get anywhere near it) for fear of bodily harm and drink spillage. From my vantage point three quarters of the way back, it was clear that front of house movement was considerable and as the set progressed this simply intensified. 'Getting Away With Murder', 'Between Angels And Insects' and 'Where Did The Angels Go' were intense yet melodic and the hooks were so addictive that an antidote should be issued with each ticket.

Trying to keep track of front-man Jacoby Shaddix is a job for several people and I have great respect for anyone who managed to get a decent photo of him tonight. Despite his antics, one can never disrespect just how good his vocals are. They never missed throughout the whole show and put to shame some so called vocalists out there who are half his age. The perfect sound mix allowed for definition between guitarist Jerry Horton, bass player Tobin Esperance and drummer Tony Palermo; the performances from all three were superb. It was good to hear 'Tightrope' again (performed live for the first time in around fifteen years) and the melancholic subtleties of the song highlighted just how good a singer Shaddix actually was. Every Roach album was plundered during the eighteen song set and the newer material, that also included 'Broken As Me' and 'Warriors', saw no dip in quality or tempo. Ninety minutes passed by very quickly and the encore of 'Last Resort' (naturally), 'Scars' and a frantic '....To Be Loved' left both band an audience drained.

Many Fireworks readers will dismiss Papa Roach on name alone, still associating them unfairly with their Nu-Metal roots, but in terms of entertainment they are one to beat and a must every year for me.

Dave Bott

AMARAMTHE, ENGEL, SANTA CRUZ
Nottingham: The Rescue Rooms
21 March 2015

The Rescue Rooms is only a small venue but it is impressive. Though this was only my second visit (my previous was also for Amaranthe twelve months ago), I had been looking forward to another night of intense sights and sounds.

Santa Cruz took to the stage at half six and the thirty minutes that followed was a good showcase for their brand of 1980's styled Sleaze Rock. They have the distinction of possessing two very talented guitarists and the song structures allowed for an extensive display of their skills. The self-indulgent solo segments failed to detract from the impact of the songs and the likes of 'My Remedy', '6(66) Feet Under' and 'Wasted And Wounded' (all from the recent self-titled album) managed to create a buzz throughout the crowd. The hooks were strong enough to allow for enthusiastic crowd involvement and though they lacked originality, they certainly generated a feel good factor. 'Aiming High' brought things to a close in anthemic fashion and the girls at the front of the room even had a chance to stroke lead singer/lead guitarist Arttu Kuosmanen hair as he dipped forward during the song.

I was unfamiliar with the band that followed, Engel, but they seemed to have quite a few of their own fans dotted around so I decided to see what they were about. Unfortunately, the Swedish Death Metal quartet came across as clichéd and uninspiring. The songs were lost in the noisy mix and the bass/drums rumble disguised anything remotely like a structure. Front-man Mikael Sehlin's vocals were harsh and throaty and became tiresome after a few songs. 'Casket Closing', 'Question Your Place' and 'Your Shadow Haunts You' were aggressive for sure, but I think I would have preferred SC to have been second on the bill instead.

Amaranthe seem to have developed a knack for creating great albums. The most recent, 'Massive Addictive', has never been far away from the player and I was keen to see the band again following their great show in 2014. What was apparent before they took to the stage was that the size of the crowd had increased greatly. I'm not sure if tonight was a sell-out, it was close, but there were certainly a lot more people than present than on my previous visit. The intro tape gave way to the energetic 'Digital World' and when this was followed by 'Hunger' and 'Invincible', it was impossible to keep hold of my pint and the chance of taking any decent photos was just an impossibility.

Amaranthe's musical style has always been a source of discussion but I'm still quite happy to call it Disco Death Metal. Having three lead singers, all with distinctly different voices, adds to the uniqueness of the Swedes sound and though each understandably had moments of inactivity, they all had great presence. Elize Ryd was a revelation tonight and she seemed to have come out of her shell somewhat. Her vocals were without question but she had an increased stage confidence and was happy to throw shapes when not singing and interacted a lot more with the crowd.

The band were augmented by backing tapes (something that is becoming more frequent) so the arrangements stayed true to the studio versions. Guitarist Olof Morck, bass player Johan Andreassen and drummer Morten Lowe Sorensen generated a powerful sound but the taped keyboards augmented the sound to great effect; to such an extent that they became almost epic in nature despite being just three/four minute workouts. It was not difficult to be caught up in the likes of 'Serendipity', '1,000,000 Lightyears', 'Massive Addictive' and 'Electroheart', as the hooks and melodies were just so infectious. 'Amaranthine' often acts as a showcase for Ryd and when the rest of the band kicked in as well, it was a "hairs on the back of the neck" moment. The show closed with a three song encore that included 'Automatic', 'Drop Dead Cynical' and 'The Nexus'. For me seventy-five minutes passed far too quickly but based on this show, I predict Amaranthe will be filling larger venues in no time.

Dave Bott

Frédéric Slama's AOR

Try not to blink – otherwise you're likely to miss another album by the restless French musician, songwriter and producer Frédéric Slama, who makes a return with yet another star-studded AOR release! To get into the details behind 'Return To L.A.', Alexandra Mrozowska caught up with Frédéric for a bit of interrogation.

It didn't take long to release yet another AOR album. How do you manage to maintain the quality of the recordings in such a haste?

Well, at the risk of sounding immodest, I've been at the peak of my creativity during the last few years and I'm recording new songs all the times, so I had many in stock, and enough good songs to release another album pretty quickly after the last one. You have to remember that during the '70s and the '80s a lot of artists used to release at least two albums per year, sometime even three or four including a live album. At the same time I want to keep a high level of quality and I don't release half the songs I record. It's like playing chess, you have to think ahead, that's why my 2016 album is almost finished and I'm already working on the 2017 one. No, you won't get rid of AOR that easily! (laughs)

The new AOR album features participation from the likes of Paul Sabu, Jesse Damon of Silent Rage and Rick Riso. What do you think these particular artists brought into the project?

They all have something special and I've been a big fan of these singers for years. I've worked with most of them in the past and I consider them as friends... Paul Sabu is a legend. He should have his statue in every city! I love his voice. He gives everything he's got in the delivery of the vocals for the benefit of the songs. I've always admired Jesse Damon. He has an incredible voice and a sense of rhythm few singers have. It was an honour to work on two songs with him for the new AOR courtesy of my good friend Paul Sabu. Rick Riso is becoming with each passing year the new Glenn Hughes... I promised him I would say that for a big cheque (laughs). No, seriously, Rick might be a little less-known, but his vocals are huge and I've been using him in my AOR albums for more than ten years now. I have to mention too the fabulous Tommy Funderburk, the wonderful Erika and the extraordinary girls from Chasing Violets, Sarah and Mélissa Fontaine who are by far France's best Melodic Rock singers!

Was there any difference in what's inspired you lyric and music wise?

Yes, I wanted a slighter harder edge than the previous album, 'L.A Connection', though I'm still far from Iron Maiden. But I suppose people who buy an AOR album want to hear good Melodic Rock, otherwise you can lock them in an asylum. The lyrics are among my best ones and tell stories with a real beginning and a real ending with original ideas, so there is substance in these songs, I hope. I buy a lot of CDs and when I hear all these fantastic bands that come up with stupid lyrics, no theme in their songs, or things that have been done thirty years ago, I'd like to roll up in my grave as if I was dead, and sometimes I wish I was when I hear these kind of lyrics. But as you know I still have at least fifty more AOR albums to release, so that would have to wait!

Apart from you and Tommy Denander, Paul Sabu was also involved in the co-production process of 'Return To L.A.'. Any comment on that?

Paul knows exactly what I want - apart from women, money and drugs - so he knows perfectly well what to do to please me in term of arrangements, ideas or sounds. We discussed a lot the direction I wanted to give to 'Return To L.A' and after giving him one million dollars, he thought all my ideas were pure genius (laughs). Paul 'The Legend' Sabu has worked with everybody from Shania Twain to David Bowie so he can adapt easily and that's what makes him a top musician and producer.

The best AOR album and the best line-up so far was...

I was waiting for the trick question and I was thinking I'm almost at the end of the interview and Alexandra forgot it – I can relax now! But now I'm trapped like a rat in front of a cheese and I have to choose between my AOR babies! Why did you do this to me? Why? (laughs) Maybe I could try to say I love them all the same cause they're part of me, but no one will be satisfied with this answer and your readers will go to bed having nightmares without knowing which AOR is the best one ever. So I'm going to take a big risk and say… 'The Secrets Of L.A.'! Yeah, you see I didn't say "the last album", like all artists in the world would say, but the one from 2013!

If you had to stick with only one singer performing your songs until the very end of your career – who would it be?

Can I say "you"? But I don't think you sing so I will have to choose someone else! This one is very tough for me because I like all these singers more than anything in the world so I don't know how could I choose just one? Plus it means I will never work again with the other ones and they will run over me with their cars if they see me crossing the street! All I can tell is when I was young, for me the perfect singer was Lou Gramm and I imagined all my songs sung by him. Of course everybody's older now and I have to go back to my retirement home so the nurse can feed me, if you don't mind!

Any last words?

I released this new album 'Return To L.A' by myself cause I was fed up with some labels telling you what to do, paying you peanuts, talking to you badly and not even doing a good promotion of the albums they release! It's time the artists said "No" to people who don't care about them anymore. If you love the artists, please buy the CDs. It's a small gesture but it will allow the artists to go on. A lot of people who loves AOR/Melodic Rock support the bands they love by doing so and I really admire them for not letting us down. I do exactly the same with my fellow artists. So if you like Melodic Rock with an edge, and want to hear singers at the peak of their form, please buy the new AOR CD 'Return To L.A.'. I would be almost ready to give each and every one of you $100 to do so! I said "almost"! Don't dream too much my friends and keep on rocking!

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